

★ DANCEOLOGY ★

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PERFORMING ARTS CAMPUS



“I’ve used skills from working with the NFL and smart professional teachers and my family.”

—NICOLE LUCIA, OWNER



Built on Solid Floors and Teamwork

Former San Diego Charger Girl Nicole Lucia leads a tour of her dance facility. BY KRIS EITLAND

PHOTOGRAPHY BY JIM CARMODY

Nicole Lucia leans against her desk in Danceology, the 14,000-square-foot performing arts campus she owns north of San Diego, and stretches her arms. She pulls the sleeves of her stylish athletic shirt down over her hands. Her neon-orange nail polish perfectly matches a tank top that peeks out at her hips. Over her head, a monitor displays a closed-circuit video of dance rooms, and behind her is a poster-size image of a glamorous cheerleader.

“Yes, that’s me as a Charger Girl, right out of Academy of Our Lady of Peace,” she says with a smile. “And now I’m in charge of all this,” gesturing to indicate the studio that she founded in 2002. She raises her voice to be heard over the rumbling sound of dancing feet and looks up to the ceiling. “It’s noisy like this all the time. It’s a happy sound—glad we have solid floors.”

Lucia often talks about the floors in her two-story space, and with good reason. She has invested between \$15,000 and \$20,000 in equipment for each of the seven dance rooms that comprise Danceology: sprung flooring covered with marley or wood, mirrors, viewing glass and state-of-the-art sound and video systems.

During the tour, we pass two maintenance men. “They wash the glass and floors every day,” Lucia says. “We keep this place spotless. Tap dancing is hard on floors. We have those done in regular rotation, that’s about \$1,500 every year or two. Gouging is worst near the stairs where little dancers stand.”

The Danceology logo is large in the lobby. Receptionists sign people in and out. Some dancers arrive after school every day and stay until 9 pm. Those who dance on the competition team train 25 to 30 hours a week and rehearse or travel to competitions on weekends.



Lucia employs 26 instructors, four program directors, an operations manager and six administrative people.

Hallways painted purple are lined with photographs of master teachers and star students. Each image is wrapped on a frame like a painting. The tiny-tot areas have painted murals and one-way mirrored glass. There are shelves for bags and books, desks and Wi-Fi, multiple restrooms and a shower.

Students and parents can watch closed-circuit dance action on flat-screen TVs in the Snack Barre lounge. Parents help serve food and drinks from a simple kitchen, but Lucia says all other operations are done by paid staff.

After Lucia outgrew her first 2,000-square-foot studio, she partnered with her mother, Jeanne Lucia, to build a modern campus in a plain industrial park. “It was an empty warehouse,” she says, “which was terrifying and exciting at the same time. We wanted spacious dance rooms and modern common areas. We were in a new area full of growing families. Fourteen years later I teach some of the same dancers who were in my first tiny-tot class.

“We’ve had some tough years. We finished our build-out in 2008 as the economy dived. The toll was devastating in 2010 because families were scaling back.

“We recovered. It’s invaluable to have a strong program for ages 3 to 8 because they train and develop through the years. Balancing the budget isn’t easy. We operate on a tight margin, but I’m committed to paying my staff and giving clients value. I want this to be open and affordable to everyone.”

TEAM EFFORT

Lucia says she was always athletic, and she danced growing up. She auditioned for the San Diego Chargers cheerleaders on

a whim and stayed for three seasons.

“I worked up to captain and was chosen to be the Charger rep at the Pro Bowl,” she says. “I learned leadership skills and how to interact with many types of people. I am grateful.”

Now she has a team of 26 instructors on staff. She also has four program directors, one operations manager and six administrative employees. A color-coded schedule shows classes: all levels of ballet, tap, technique, jazz/lyrical, acrobatics, contemporary, hip hop, stretch turns and leaps, legs and feet. There is also an adaptive dance program for dancers with special needs, ages 4 to 8. It introduces ballet, tap and creative movement and offers performance opportunities.

“Total enrollment is 800, and about 180 students are in competition,” she says. “Annual revenue is about \$1.2 million. We have many programs to support that enrollment: a holiday show, a full *Nutcracker* and a showcase for every dancer in June. We have more than 100 classes per week, not including rehearsals or private lessons. Multiple times a year, I fly in guests for master classes and workshops.”

ALWAYS PROFESSIONAL

It’s a balance of “discipline and nurture, and some fun,” Lucia says, as groups of students hop out of her way in a corridor. During a dance demonstration, she divides students into groups. The waiting group scrambles to the side and hugs the wall to make more room.

Natural light shines through big windows on the second floor, and Lucia takes a seat on a black leather sofa near a line of desks that she calls the homework area. We can hear

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muffled sounds from a class down the hall. Three mothers waiting outside a studio comfort a young girl who has a broken toe and needs help taping it.

“I came from a nurturing family,” Lucia says, “and this is a safe place, a home. I do private lessons and rehearsals. My daughter Gianna is 10 and takes solo and group classes almost every day. If she wanted to do soccer, that’d be OK. But for a lot of kids, sports aren’t a good fit.”

Coaching dancers is Lucia’s passion. To get results, she uses discipline tempered with inspiration. “I am not interested in being their friend,” she says. “There is time to laugh, but there are boundaries. Kids listen and do as I say because they understand what is expected of them. Expectations are set and never change.”

She encourages parents to enjoy classroom viewing, but has a strict policy of no parents or adults other than staff upstairs. Tiny-tot areas on the first floor are less restrictive. A common mistake is having parents help run a business, she says.

“We are a professional team, not volunteers,” says Lucia. “We coach minds and teach bodies. We support dance competition, and we prepare young people for success on a stage and in life, the wins and losses. There’s discipline and team bonding, and we help with scholarships and college. There are many opportunities, and we work as a team to find the right chemistry for a college education or other direction.”

Emma York, 13, trains in multiple styles at Danceology six days a week. Wearing a sky-blue leotard and winning smile, she takes a break to talk about competition and TV appearances. She attended the Joffrey Ballet School Summer Intensive in San Francisco on scholarship and performed on “Dancing with the Stars.” “You can find us on YouTube,” York says of her duet with dance partner Joey German. “We danced the younger roles of Julianne and Derek Hough. I hope to attend Juilliard.”

Sophia Lucia, Nicole Lucia’s young cousin, also trained here. She has danced on television and holds the Guinness World Record for 55 consecutive pirouettes.



Competing in a sport is expensive, and Lucia says it’s the same for dance. Classes, conventions, hotels, flights, costumes and entry fees add up.

“We know it’s tough to participate at that level,” Lucia says. “That’s why we offer a program for dancers who want a smaller commitment. It’s less rigorous and more feasible for families. We welcome any dancer, beginner or advanced. Anyone can take a technique class for \$20. We’re inclusive.”

“In 14 years I’ve used skills from working with the NFL and smart professional teachers, and my family,” Lucia says. “I don’t ask people to work for free. I try to hire the best and provide a nurturing environment here.”

She pulls out drawers filled with pink ballet shoes, tap shoes and clothes. “This is our lost-and-found,” she says, laughing. “I could open a store. Some kids come back for them, but most are left here. Kids who do the trial week can use these shoes if they need to. Shoes are expensive.” **DT**

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