



NIKI LUCIA WITH DANCEOLOGY STUDENTS, COURTESY LUCIA.

Danceology Owner Niki Lucia Believes in a Winning Mindset



BY HALEY HILTON

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This past summer, Danceology owner Nicole (Niki) Lucia led her team of roughly 150 competitive dancers to win the title “Studio of the Year” at one of the country’s largest dance competitions, The Dance Awards. The journey to get there was full of hard work, discipline and, most importantly, according to Lucia, the will to win.

Lucia started dancing when she was 3 years old at a small studio in San Diego called RB Dancers. By 8 she was so enamored with the artform that she was set on pursuing a professional dance

career. Not long after graduating high school, she joined the San Diego (now Los Angeles) Chargers Girls Dance Team. She spent three years with the troupe (the third of which she was captain) before moving on to spend a season with the Dallas Cowboys, working with their dance team as well as their arena football team, The Dallas Desperados.



NIKI LUCIA WITH DANCEOLOGY STUDENTS AT NYCDA, COURTESY LUCIA.
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Though she eventually found success in the professional world, as a child Lucia often craved more opportunities than she was afforded with her local studio training. “It was always my dream to grow up and open my own studio so I could provide other dancers with the kind of experiences I wished I’d had,” she says. Surprisingly, Lucia accomplished that goal far earlier than she had planned. Shortly after her time with the Cowboys organization, she found herself in her hometown, driving past an open plot of dirt in the middle of nowhere with a leasing sign sticking up out of the ground. Despite being in her early 20s, Lucia bravely called the number on the sign and convinced the commercial realtor, John Still, to give her a lease on the small lot. While the strip center surrounding Lucia’s plot of land was being developed, she would stand on the dirt with flyers for her soon-to-be dance studio and hand them out to people walking by. By the time her school, [Danceology](https://danceology.biz/) (<https://danceology.biz/>), opened in 2002, she had collected 60 dancers. (Still’s child would eventually join Lucia’s school and train with her all the way through high school.) “Somehow I had convinced everyone to believe in me,” she says. In the 20 years since, Lucia has moved to a 14,000-square-foot building, and her roster has grown to include somewhere between 700 and 800 students—150 of which are competitive dancers.

These days, Lucia’s time as an educator is split between running her studio and coaching her competitive teams (she also coaches her former high school dance team). When asked about her approach to cleaning choreography and working with competitive dancers, Lucia says she emphasizes what she calls a “winning mindset.” “The winning mindset is the true belief in yourself, without any limitation,” she says. “When we won ‘Studio of the Year’ at the Dance Awards this past summer, I had coached the dancers to believe in their capacity to be winners in an elite competitive environment—that if they were being their best, it would pay off.” According to Lucia, that winning

mindset is beneficial even when the dancers don't win. "We have previously been in a position where we have prepared as best we could, but art is subjective, and they didn't win," she says. "Yet my dancers were still satisfied because they had a winning mindset and knew they were amazing." Still, Lucia doesn't pretend that the competition isn't motivating to her dancers. "The dancers signed up to compete—a football team doesn't play a game to just have fun. They have a will to win, and so do we."



NIKI LUCIA WITH DANCEOLOGY STUDENT AT JUMP, COURTESY LUCIA.

According to Lucia, her students are able to maintain a winning mentality because she creates a rehearsal space in which dancers feel emotionally and physically safe. This gives them the freedom to explore the work without ego, limitations or boundaries. She does this by removing pressure and letting the dancers know they can trust her. "I let my dancers know that I am in the boat with them," she says. "I won't waste your time. I will prepare you so that you will feel ready by the time you are in the wings offstage. As long as you do your part and stay focused, you will be able to finish, having done your best." Beyond the positive energy Lucia brings into the studio herself, she also encourages kindness and gratitude from her dancers so that they can feel supported by one another. "The dancers need to contribute to a space in which everyone feels heard, seen, valued, understood and appreciated," she says.

Here, Lucia shares some of the teaching tools that have helped her create a winning studio with a winning mindset.

How she prepares for class: "Because most of what I do is coaching and mentoring on the competitive level, I like to research a quote, theme or lesson that I want to get across to the dancers during class that day. I also take time to consider what we had done in rehearsal the week before so I know what we need to work on next."

Her go-to teaching attire: "When it comes to brands, I love Alo and Lululemon. I also love to wear my studio swag. I am always in a Danceology sweatshirt or T-shirt. On my feet I like to wear slip-on Vans or one of my pairs of Nikes that I love."

How she keeps her energy up during long rehearsal days: “I have coffee when I wake up at 5 am, and in the middle of the day I like to have a black tea lemonade, unsweetened, from Starbucks. While we are talking about drinks, I also like Liquid Death—it’s the best sparkling water.”

The food she can’t live without: “I’m an Italian girl, so I would say my family’s Italian recipes. I could not live without my grandmother and grandfather’s cookbook.”

Her favorite nondance activities: “I love to cook, DIY things for my house, listen to live music and go on fun hikes.”

Her ideal day off: “Going to brunch with my daughter and my boyfriend, having mimosas and going to a pool.”

The books that have inspired her: “Right now I am reading *The Energy Bus*, which was recommended to me by my friend and colleague Robert Contreras. It is an amazing book about how to bring positive energy into your daily life and be joyful.”

Recommended YouTube videos: “I love to talk to the kids about specific trailblazers in the industry (like Martha Graham) and have them look up their specific techniques on YouTube. I also like to have them watch footage of professional dance companies like Nederlands Dans Theater and [methods like] Ground Grooves.”

Items she never leaves home without: “My rosary (I’ve had it since I was 13 and I never go anywhere without it) and my laptop. I’m always working.”

Her guilty pleasure: “Lots of really good red wine.”