



How One Entrepreneur Overcame Adversity — with Some Fancy Footwork

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Amy Paul Giordano might have wavered beneath the weight of her legendary father's jazz dance reputation, running a school that bears his name. But, then again, had she been a different person, she also might have allowed herself to be sidelined by adversity — a devastating accident, the unexpected death of her mother, an illness — and never found her calling as an entrepreneur at all.

Instead, the youngest daughter of jazz dance master Gus Giordano entered the business world shaped by a different sort of legacy: a firm belief that there are multiple paths to the same dream, no single “right way” to succeed.

“I don't feel any pressure (to live up to the legacy), and I think it's because of my mom and dad. It wasn't that you ever had to do it the way they wanted, it wasn't about the perfection,” said Amy Giordano, who opened the [Gus Giordano Dance School](#) in Chicago's Andersonville neighborhood in 2011. The school is an offshoot of the dance school founded in Evanston by Amy Giordano's parents in 1953.

“My dad and mom were so wonderful. Dancers would come in and they would dance with us for a time, but (my parents) always encouraged and nurtured them to go on and continue spreading jazz dance, but in a new form,” said Amy Giordano. “I saw all this — there were so many options for dance. . . .”

Which is why, when Amy shattered her right knee in a serious car accident as a teen, she didn't consider it the end of her own dance career. She simply saw it as a change — and a chance to go to college, something not many professional dancers did. She attended Tulane University in New Orleans and launched a career in marketing. She married and had three children — now 21, 19 and 15 — and continued to help out at her parents' dance school.

But in 1993, when Amy Giordano's second child was just a week old, her beloved mother, Peg, died of a heart attack. Amy took over her mother's responsibilities at the school and became her father's personal assistant and, in the years that followed, learned a lot about running the business.

In 2008, Gus Giordano died and Amy and her husband divorced. The stress took a toll, and in 2009, Amy was hospitalized for four days with bleeding ulcers. In late 2010 and early 2011, she had surgeries to replace both knees. That spring, she closed the school in Evanston and, despite her health struggles, reopened in Andersonville as her own business.

"Life is constant change so you just have to adapt to what happens," Amy said. "A lot of people are scared of change. Opening your own business, being an entrepreneur is constant change."

As a business owner, she has drawn lessons from her years of instruction in ballet, tap, modern dance and jazz. Dancing taught her the importance of discipline, preparation and creativity. She learned to carefully observe the people and ideas around her, much as a dancer needs to be aware of other dancers on stage.

"All of those aspects apply to running a business," she said.

Amy handles nearly every major aspect of the business, and students and parents say she is a constant, visible presence. The school offers classes for adults and children and serves over 300 students.



"She really is involved with everybody. She's hands-on, always positive," said dance student Sony Noe, 47, of Wilmette. "That's got to be a struggle to do that by herself, but she's always got a smile on her face. . . . She's nonstop energy."

Those who know her say she's warm and nurturing and that carries over into the atmosphere of the school. She asks the children in the school's dance company about their favorite candy so she can have it on hand — even if that means buying dozens of different kinds. A woman who visited the school recently to see a friend's child perform said she was surprised by how quickly Amy approached and welcomed her when she walked in.

Dance teacher Laura Thurston said Amy seems determined to create the kind of welcoming environment that her mother did years ago.

"Her ability to handle everything is what I admire about her the most," said Ms. Thurston, who also helps out with administrative tasks at the school. "She's able to keep that smiling face forward and still be so caring toward others while knowing that she's got 15 or 20 things floating around in the back of her head that need to be done."

Amy credits her parents with giving her the resilience and confidence to move forward, even in the face of challenges.

"Even though my mom passed away when I was young, I knew—because she had given me such inspiration that life was fantastic— that she wanted me to continue living my life. If I sat and cried every day for a year because she was gone, that would not be the best thing for her memory," Amy said. "It's all a personal choice how you deal with adversity."

Obstacles, she's learned, don't have to mean the end of a dream — only the need to choose a different path. And then, it's simply about continuing on.

"You can succeed no matter what. If you're willing to do the work and take the risks, you can succeed. You can not (say) it's the wrong time, because it's never going to be the right time. There's always going to be something."