



A dancer's duet with medicine

Medicine and dance demand passion and dedication. Jason Vaz is managing to pursue both careers with hard work and support from his med school

BY VANESSA SANTILLI



Jason Vaz has great balance. This is true both figuratively and literally, as he's currently balancing a career as a professional ballet dancer and medical student.

"I'm definitely going to do a residency and I'm going to do the regular path for medicine," Vaz, 24, tells the *Medical Post* in an interview. "It's just how I'm getting to that first year of residency that is a bit unconventional."

After completing his third year of medical school last August at the University of Alberta, Vaz made the decision to pursue dance full throttle.

"I'm spreading my fourth year over a couple of years," he says.

Now in his fourth season dancing with Citie Ballet in Edmonton, Vaz decided to take some time off from full-time studies after he attended a talk on the lifestyle that would follow being matched up with a residency program.

"Those professional expectations increase each year, and that professional pressure doesn't stop once you are staff," he says. "And I thought to myself, 'If I'm ever going to dance, this is the last time I'm ever going to do this.'"

Born and raised in Medicine Hat, Alta., Vaz completed three years in the bachelor of health sciences program at the University of Calgary before being accepted into medical school.

Dr. Melanie Lewis, associate dean of learner advocacy and wellness at the University of Alberta, helped Vaz to fully realize both of his passions by setting up a more flexible schedule.

"He got to a point where he was doing very well and had a lot of opportunities. I don't know how he balanced a full-time dance career with medical school," says Dr. Lewis. "And he did so very well."

But while the University of Alberta is quite flexible about students deviating from the usual path through med school for other academic pursuits such as an MBA or Rhodes Scholarship, Vaz was the first to approach the university about a professional dance career, says Lewis. "That was something the faculty had to grapple with a little bit."

In the end, the university was happy to help, she adds.

"We think students pursuing other passions, especially ones related to humanities, can only lend themselves to making better doctors who can better relate to patients," says Lewis. "And I think those skills interrelate quite nicely."

"He's a very genuine, authentic individual and he's so hardworking. And he's very sincere in all the goals that he has, whether it's pursuing dance to the fullest or pursuing medicine at the same time."

Lewis calls him a trailblazer, setting the stage for students who come behind him to follow their other hopes and dreams.

"Now we understand how we can accommodate and how we can be flexible with unique situations," says Lewis. "I think that will make us a better medical school, produce better students and be able to support students better."

And although he's taking the path less travelled right now, Vaz says he is confident that the skills he's acquiring in the dancing world will cross over in medicine.

"Once you step away from the classroom or your daily routine, as a medical student, you see how . . . stepping into a new environment and adapting quickly are really important."

On the flip side, he says his medical knowledge has definitely had an impact on his dancing in the areas of nutrition and injury prevention.

For the hard-working Jason Vaz, a common theme propels him in his two careers: the belief that you're always learning and can always improve.

"And while that's not really a focus in medical school, you get a lot of background knowledge and you get a lot of experience talking to people about those topics. That was really helpful because when I started dancing more, I really started to see how that became an issue."

With this in mind, so far Vaz has been injury-free.

He's also learning how to bring out the best in people—whether it is his dance partner, choreographer, director or the backstage team.

His time away from full-time studies has also helped him to realize how great a profession medicine is, he says. "It is something I could never give up."

At the moment, he's planning on specializing in anesthesiology, but there's still a bit of wiggle room for this decision. And you can never be short of experiences, says Vaz.

"Everything you do really enriches a medical career. If you do something like art or sports, it gives you that much more you can relate to your colleagues or your patients with."

But at the end of the day, Vaz says he is just happy that he has found not one, but two passions.

"The thing about both disciplines is that you're never good enough. With medicine, it's basically this infinite sea of knowledge. You're always in some sense a perpetual learner."

As a dancer, the level of perfection for which you strive is extremely high.

"If you really want to please the audience or master a role, then that's something that's always in the back of your mind. And that's what motivates me each day." **MP**

