

# True Crew Dance Co. teaches kids confidence

By Mike Winikoff

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PORT ST. LUCIE – True Crew Dance Co. in Port St. Lucie is all about turning children into believers. Owner Toni Szparaga wants every child to believe they can do whatever they set their mind to.

“If you look around the studio, you see the word ‘believe’ everywhere,” Ms. Szparaga told Hometown News. “The teacher needs to find something that will make that child believe in themselves, and excel beyond. I’ve always been the type of person who puts the standards as high as you can possibly get them, to get the children to reach for a goal. My motto is if you can believe it, you can achieve it.”

True Crew, now in its 14th year, doesn’t allow students to use the word “can’t.”

“I tell the kids and the parents to never say ‘can’t,’ Ms. Szparaga said. “As soon as they say ‘can’t’ once, it goes into their heads and they start to believe it. Around here, if you say ‘can’t,’ you’re giving me 25 push-ups.”

“Instead of ‘can’t,’ I encourage them to say ‘I’m having difficulty.’ It’s to get them to understand that maybe they are unable to execute something right now, but if they keep pushing, there is a path to accomplishing it.”

“I ask them ‘when you were born, were you running?’ I show them that they had to start by crawling, then standing and walking, often with someone helping them. That’s what life is.”

The second guiding principle of the dance

studio is that students are expected to perform some public service. The goal of True Crew is not just to help people become good dancers or athletes. It is to teach them to be good citizens.

For company students, who compete, Ms. Szparaga requires that they keep their grades up, their behavior has to be good at home, and they have to give back to the community.

“I think it’s important for the children to learn to give back. We’ve gone to nursing homes. Every year we do the Relay of Life. My students know that if they come here, they have to give back to the community, because it makes a difference,” Ms. Szparaga said. “We’re not just here to dance, we’re here to make a difference. I work to make the kids believe they can make a difference.”

True Crew has a recreational program, that’s just for fun, and a competitive program.

“Either way, nobody in the studio is here to judge them,” Ms. Szparaga said. “This is the time they can be as crazy, as emotional as they have to be. It helps them alleviate the stresses that they’re dealing with on a daily basis. And maybe the energy they have from whatever is going on can be channeled into something.”

The studio is lined with trophies that the students have won. There are so many trophies that they don’t know where to put them anymore.

True Crew offers almost every form of dance, for both children and adults. They teach ballet, tap, jazz, pointe, musical theater, hip hop, and more.



Staff photo by Sevin Bullwinkle

The award-winning True Crew competition team.

“I also teach special needs students. I had a student for years whose parents were told the child would never talk, never walk, never do anything. I met her when she was two years old, in a wheelchair. The girl has severe Down’s Syndrome. She’s now one of my pride-and-joy students.”

They also have easy flow yoga classes, for the elderly or people who have difficulty with movements. “It can be like therapy for them,” Ms. Szparaga said.

True Crew also works with a lot of local

athletes, both boys and girls.

“The skills definitely transfer over. We teach moves that they use in basketball and football. The agility, the stretching, jumping, all apply to the sports they want to play.”

“I started the first ever all-boys dance class on the Treasure Coast. Boys dance too. I have boys who only do hip hop, and other boys who do everything. All girls want a boy who can dance.”

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## Crew

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As a youth in New York, this writer attended Studio 54 with my older brother, and I can attest to the fact that boys who can dance get lots more dates. All eyes in any room gravitate to a young man who has dance moves.

All teachers are trained, certified professionals who have experience working with students of all ages, abilities and exceptionalities. They hold degrees in dance and education, as well as numerous certifications. Some of the teachers are psychology majors. One had her own studio in New York.

"My hip-hop teachers are all prior students," Ms. Szparaga said. "My musical theater teacher is also a prior student. They come back. Honesty, integrity, and loyalty makes the True Crew family."

Former students wanting to come back to teach is a great tribute to the integrity of the studio.

"They know what my expectations are, because they had to come up the ladder meeting those expectations. Those are the best teachers to get these kids to believe in themselves, and feel good about themselves. It all goes back to believing. If you believe you can do it, you can do it."

True Crew Dance Co. gave birth to the 2018 World Cup and 2018 World Dance Champions.

"The last four years we've been invited to travel to World Dance Championships. Last year, we were the overall World Dance Champions," Ms. Szparaga said. "This year we brought four routines, and two of our



Photo courtesy of True Crew

True Crew owner and artistic director Toni Szparaga.

routines made the top five. It's a great experience for the kids. Being invited to Worlds, we're representing the United States, not just Port St. Lucie or Florida. It's been incredible."

True Crew has three dance studios in about 5,000 square feet of space, and waiting areas equipped with viewing screens, so parents can watch their child's classes and interaction with teachers.

The studio offers family, police, fire, teacher and active military duty discounts, and is a no-contract studio, so families are not held to a contract should the need arise to discontinue classes.

True Crew Dance Co. is located at 1912-1918 SW Biltmore Street, Port St. Lucie. For more information, call (772) 879-2739, email truecrew.mstoni@gmail.com, or visit www.truecrew.org.

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