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Pair of dancers turn toward doctorates

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ITHACA - As they float across the stage of the State Theatre on tiptoe, Nadia Drake and Deena Schmidt look like your typical ballerinas - thin, muscular, beautiful and graceful. Looking at these talented **Ithaca Ballet** dancers on stage over the weekend, no one would ever know that they spend only half their time on stage. But when they are not adorned in tutus, tights and toe shoes, Drake and Schmidt spend the rest of their time studying for their doctoral degrees at Cornell University.

Drake is currently in her first year of classes in genomics, and Schmidt is completing her fourth year of study in applied mathematics. Both women once had aspirations of dancing professionally, but later chose to abandon their artistic dreams for more academic ones.

"I got injured at age 14 and then had to take time off (from ballet)," said Drake.

Foot problems ended up sidelining Drake for one year and prevented her from doing what she loved most - dancing. Despite taking time off, Drake's injuries persisted over time. Two years after her injury occurred, Drake made the decision to forego her pursuit of becoming a professional ballerina and went to Cornell, where she graduated in 2002 with a triple major in biology, dance and psychology.

Schmidt attended college at the University of Akron, hoping that she would be able to audition for ballet companies after receiving her undergraduate education. What she found was that most companies wanted dancers who were 16 or 17 years old, and as a ballerina in her twenties she was "too old." Schmidt chose to begin her graduate studies at Cornell instead.

Although both women ultimately decided not to pursue ballet professionally, they spent most of their young lives training for a career in dance. Drake attended San Francisco Ballet School while in high school and Schmidt studied at Summit School of Dance and Ballet Arts in Minneapolis.

Drake said that young dancers have a hard time juggling academics with their artistic studies. She explained that workouts for most serious ballet dancers consist of six hours of classes every day. Therefore, many ballerinas receive homeschooling, including some dancers in **Ithaca Ballet's** company.

Eryn Cash is only 16 years old, but in the next few months she will be auditioning for American Ballet Theatre in New York City. Currently a senior dancer with **Ithaca Ballet** and the Snow Queen in this year's Nutcracker, she will graduate from Ithaca High School this spring - a year earlier than most students.

Cash already understands the stress that comes along with pursuing a career in dance.

"You're constantly comparing yourself to other dancers," said Cash. "(Teachers) tell you you're not good enough."

For the last three summers Cash has studied at American Ballet Theatre in the hope it will help her chances of getting into the company. Cash wants to work as a professional

ballerina until her early thirties, when most ballerinas retire, and then return to college to for her degree.

"I want to go to college once I retire or if I get hurt and then I'll become a physical therapist," said Cash.

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