

MEBANE, N.C. — Girls in glittering costumes cluster together in the wings of the Mebane Arts and Community Center stage, their faces bright with anticipation as they await the announcement of the top ten. It's the preliminary round of the Carolina Dance Masters Solo Title Scholarship Competition, and for 16-year-old Faith Pons, the day felt almost dreamlike. Just days earlier, Hurricane Helene had left her family without power, and now she found herself under the stage lights, her ankle aching and her mind distracted.

The unfamiliar stage and her self-doubt left Faith certain she'd fallen short. Clapping politely as her friends were called, she resigned herself to disappointment as only one spot remained.

“And finally, number 101, *‘I Didn't Know My Own Strength.’*”

Relief and disbelief hit her in waves as Faith took her place on stage. She was advancing to the title competition.

Competitive dance has grown far beyond local recitals, evolving into a multibillion-dollar industry that touches the lives of thousands of families across the U.S. Each year, over 30,000 dancers participate in events hosted by organizations like Dance Masters of America and the Universal Dance Association, with flagship competitions like Showstopper drawing more than 50,000 participants annually. Supported by over 66,000 studios offering classes in ballet, jazz, hip-hop, and more, the industry demands intense commitment. Families invest thousands of dollars in lessons, costumes, travel, and competition fees, often making it a lifestyle rather than an extracurricular activity.

Faith's parents enrolled her at three years old in lessons at Debbie Huffman Dance Academy, hoping to burn off some of her limitless energy. Faith was miserable. She cried every day when her mother, Sara Keisler, dropped her off.

“A lot of days, I'd be shoving her through the door,” Keisler says. “Debbie always said, ‘She's fine. Just keep doing what you're doing.’”

By the end of that first year, Faith was hooked. Her first competition was at age eight, where she had a featured part in a group number.

“I got to whack my leg up beside my face and turn in a circle,” Faith says. “I thought I was the biggest star in the world, and I was gonna be on Broadway one day.”

What began as an outlet for her energy slowly transformed into a passion. Competing started as fun, but soon Faith discovered a deeper love for dance. “I never thought I could do this as a career,” she says. “But as I’ve gotten older and spent more time at the studio, it’s become more serious. It’s something I could really pursue.”

—

Faith stands in the center of the studio. Her solo coach, Melody Poarch, flips through a notebook brimming with practice notes.

“Can I see your turns again?” Poarch asks.

Faith nods, stepping into a fourth-position prep.

“Keep your core tight,” Poarch calls out. “That’s it. Now finish strong!”

It’s 10 a.m. on a Friday, and this weekly solo practice has been part of Faith’s routine for the past six months.

“She’s always been such a hard worker,” Poarch says. “Even when she was tiny, she was determined to get everything right.”

Poarch has been coaching Faith since she started at the studio, but she’s noticed a shift in her student’s confidence over the past two years of solo work.

“Faith isn’t a natural tumbler like some of the other girls,” Poarch explains. “So, I decided to give her something she could own. We worked on turns every week until they became her thing. It’s something she’s proud of.”

Faith has become a more expressive performer, Poarch says, and her solos reflect her journey. This year, she chose Whitney Houston’s *I Didn’t Know My Own Strength*.

“I picked it at first because it’s such a great song,” Faith says, “but when I started looking into the lyrics and talking to my teachers about it, it felt like it had been my life’s journey these past couple of years.”

Faith’s parents divorced in 2021, leaving her feeling vulnerable and unsteady. But in the studio, something shifted. “There’s a part of my solo where I grab my head and just look at the audience like I’m the strongest person in the world,” Faith says. “And I truly feel it every time I’m on stage. I remember the lyrics as I’m dancing, and I remind myself that I am strong and that I can do this.”

—

On the first day of the competition, Faith and her mother arrive at the Koury Convention Center in Greensboro just after 4 p.m. The lobby buzzes with activity, tiny dancers in pink tights and black leotards dart between rehearsals, while moms in dance studio gear haul duffle bags packed with shoes and glittery costumes.

Faith is one of ten finalists competing in the Miss Dance category of the Carolina Dance Masters Solo Title Scholarship Competition. The four-day event is hosted by Carolina Dance Masters (CDM), Chapter 15 of Dance Masters of America (DMA).

Stephanie Mayberry, the solo title director for CDM, explains that the competition is divided into four age divisions: Petite, Junior, Teen, and Miss Dance. Contestants who advance past preliminary rounds compete at the state finals, where winners are crowned and go on to represent CDM at the national DMA competition in the summer.

“Contestants are evaluated in three areas,” Mayberry says. “Interviews, title competition classes, and the solo title talent presentation.”

The interview segment requires a fact sheet detailing personal achievements, which serves as the basis for judges’ questions. Contestants are scored on poise, communication skills, and how well they engage.

The title classes test technical ability and adaptability across multiple dance styles. “Miss Dance contestants must take at least three classes, and ballet is mandatory,” Mayberry says. “Tap, jazz, modern, and acrobatics are optional but encouraged. Each class is scored, but only the three highest scores are added to the overall total.”

Finally, the Solo Title Talent Presentation allows dancers to shine onstage with their solo routines. Costumed and performing before a live audience, contestants are evaluated on performance quality, musicality, and artistic expression.

The scoring system is precise: contestants can earn up to 465 points across all three segments. Interviews are worth 30 points, Title Competition Classes up to 135 points, and the Solo Talent Presentation up to 300 points.

“I always tell Faith this weekend is a thousand-dollar weekend. But when you think about it, it’s more than that,” Sara Keisler, Faith’s mother, says.

“We used to pay \$60 a month for lessons and I thought, oh, that’s easy. Dance isn’t expensive,” Keisler says. But as Faith progresses, she explains, so do the expenses: costumes, private lessons, choreography fees, and the costs of competing. Keisler estimates that the total cost of Faith’s dance involvement is around \$10,000 a year.

“Our dance budget is \$500 a month, and we bust it every time,” Keisler says.

Faith has taken on some responsibility herself, learning to sew and stone costumes to ease the burden. “She’s willing to pitch in because she understands the cost,” Keisler says.

Despite the strain, Keisler remains committed, especially because of Faith’s dedication. “If Faith ever complained or said she didn’t want to go to class, it would be hard to pay that much money. But she doesn’t,” Keisler says. “She really wants to be here.”

—

Day two of the competition begins with the interview round. Faith spends five minutes fielding questions about her past showing lambs, her volunteer work, and her favorite Dolly Parton song before being released. Back in her hotel room, she calls her instructor to share her conversation with the judges.

“They told me I did a great job, but I feel like they say that to everyone,” Faith complains.

“They didn’t tell me that,” Ansley Guill, a fellow Miss Dance competitor and student from Faith’s studio, says.

“Yes!” Faith cheers, then pauses, reconsidering. “No offense.”

Being from the same studio and competing in the same pageant can be challenging, but overall, the girls support each other—even if they can be a little catty. That camaraderie stems from the culture fostered at Debbie Huffman Dance Academy.

“We try to make it more family-oriented so that we can support each other rather than focusing on competition between,” says Debbie Huffman, the studio owner.

Faith also works at the studio as an assistant, helping with third-grade acro and ballet classes.

“She will make a very good dance teacher,” Huffman says. “She’s great with the little kids and has the authority to guide them.”

At 11 a.m., Faith packs her bag and heads to the lobby for her title classes. She joins the other Miss contestants outside one of the Koury Center’s ballrooms, chatting as they warm up. A white ribbon with her contestant number, 10, is carefully pinned to her right hip.

While the talent segment carries the most possible points, competition classes often make or break a final score. Faith has spent weeks preparing to ensure her technique stands out. Each night, she practices in the small dance room off her garage, focusing on ballet barre exercises to strengthen her form.

“I’ve been doing pliés and tendus every night to make sure my technique is really good because that’s usually what sets me apart,” Faith says. “Everyone tells me I have pretty feet.”

Faith’s strongest styles are Ballet and lyrical, and she’s determined to earn high marks in class. Still, stepping into the spotlight alongside many talented dancers can feel overwhelming.

“I have to push myself to the front,” she says. “I’m very bad at that, making myself known. I just have to be confident in myself.”

—

Faith steps onto the stage, the last contestant in the Miss Dance category. The spotlight warms her skin as her song begins. Taking a deep breath, she lets the music guide her. Every movement is precise, and every note and count hit with confidence. As the final note approaches, she lowers into her ending pose, reaching her hand toward her chest—then falters. Her hand grazes the floor to steady herself. It’ll cost her points.

Backstage, she catches her breath, replaying the stumble in her mind. There’s a flicker of disappointment, but it’s overshadowed by pride in how far she’s come.

“I would love to win,” she says, “but I just want to be better than I was last year. Already I’ve beaten myself because I made the finals this year.”

For Faith, dance is more than trophies or titles. It’s her way of expressing herself, her anchor during difficult times. Her goals are simple: to improve a little more each year, to

outdo her past self, and to keep growing. Winning would be wonderful, but it isn't everything.

“What keeps me coming back every year is knowing that I love it,” Faith says. “I feel a lot of pressure sometimes when I'm not my best. But then I remember how much I love dance. There's no point in me basing my self-worth on one performance.”

As the awards are announced, Faith claps for each name, cheering especially loudly when her friend Macey places second overall. No matter the outcome, Faith Pons leaves the stage with something more lasting than a title: a reminder of why she dances.

Contacts:

Faith Pons
(828) 334-9393

Melody Poarch, Solo Teacher
(828) 390-4900

Sara Kiesler
(828) 381-8713

Debbie Huffman, DHDA Studio Owner
(828) 874-0499

Stephanie Mayberry, Solo Title Director of CDM
(336) 262-0514

Sources:

[Dance Masters](#)

[Carolina Dance Masters](#)