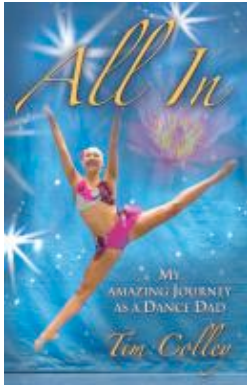




# All In

MY  
AMAZING JOURNEY  
AS A DANCE DAD

*Tim Colley*



***ALL IN: My Amazing Journey As a Dance Dad** by Tim Colley explores the highs and lows of competitive dance, blending personal experience and behind the scenes observations of the \$2 billion-plus "glamour industry" with practical advice for parents seeking greater involvement in their children's lives. The 210-page book's male perspective stands out in an industry historically dominated by women, offering broad appeal to parents, competitive dance fans and industry observers alike.*

# **ALL IN**

## **My Amazing Journey As a Dance Dad**

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**My Amazing Journey  
As a Dance Dad**

Tim Colley

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## FOREWORD

I believe that we all experience at least one amazing realization or revelation at some point in our lives. It's a sudden flash of clarity that removes all doubt. We just *know* that a decision we've made or a path we've chosen to follow is the right one, the *only* one for us. Some people call it "The Big Eureka." Five-dollar word people label it an epiphany. I think of it as the ah-ha moment and I remember my biggest one like it was yesterday.

My eight-year old daughter had just won her first dance competition title. As she received her crown, jacket and award certificate and I saw the expression of pure joy on her face, I saw what she had waited three years for me to see. Dance wasn't just a recreational activity. It was her passion. Besides her mother and me, it was the most important thing in her life.

I knew at that moment that I'd never complain about taking her to classes and competitions again. The days of just going through the motions without any real interest or enthusiasm as I had for the past three years were over. Emotions almost overcame me: a father's love and pride mixed with the excitement of watching what is possible when natural talent meets determination and hard work. I knew that I was meant to be by her side through every step of the tough, demanding, grueling, sometimes heartbreaking and sometimes exhilarating road ahead. No matter the time and financial investment and personal sacrifice it would require. I was all in. I was a Dance Dad.

Now it's hard to remember the times when I grumbled about having to leave work early to pick my daughter up after

*All In*

school and get her to the dance studio on time. I can't believe I griped about waking up before dawn so that we could get on the road to a competition hundreds of miles away. Those dreaded responsibilities became sources of joy.

I've shared my daughter's elation in victory and her disappointment—but never the feeling of defeat—when victory passes her by. I've looked on in admiration and more than a little awe at her refusal to let success and accolades go to her head. I've seen her determination to be the best she can be in all aspects of her life pay off in spades. Her dedication and willingness to not only work hard but to make the necessary sacrifices all serious artists make inspire me every day.

My daughter makes me want to be a better person, a goal I'll never stop striving to reach as I watch her pursue her dreams. I'm writing this book for many reasons: to give other parents a bird's eye view of the competitive dance world and everything it entails, to show other children that they too can make their dreams come true, and to hopefully encourage other fathers to become more involved in their children's lives.

But most of all, I'm writing it to honor a person whose character and courage set the bar for my life. I'm writing it for my daughter, Lotus Colley.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Lotus demonstrated remarkable maturity in auditioning for and winning two roles in “The Nutcracker.” Dawn and I agreed that even though she was only ten, she was mature enough to have a serious heart-to-heart talk about what was involved in helping make her dance dream a reality.

“It’s time for her to realize what this costs,” Dawn said. “Not just the money we spend that we could be spending on other things, but the time we invest and the relationships we’ve given up along the way.”

“I think she’ll be able to understand it,” I agreed.

Once rehearsals for “The Nutcracker” started and Lotus saw how much time and money Dawn and I were investing in this opportunity the timing seemed right to sit her down for “the talk.” Despite her maturity and the serious commitment she showed toward dance, Lotus was a normal kid who sometimes forgot that money doesn’t grow on trees. She periodically needed to be reminded that while her parents were a hundred percent behind the pursuit of her dance dream, it didn’t come without sacrifice.

“I wish we had a big house,” Lotus would say wistfully. “I wish I could have my friends over for a slumber party.”

I knew that most of her friends lived in houses with two and three car garages, some with swimming pools in the back yard and plenty of room for all kinds of parties. We lived in a nice three-story townhouse but I understood that it didn’t measure up to many of the homes that Lotus regularly visited. After all, she was making comparisons through the eyes of a child

*All In*

“I wish we had a big house too,” I always responded.

“Then why don’t we?” she’d ask.

“We could if you weren’t serious about dance, Lotus,” I’d answer. “We made the decision together, remember? Your mom and I explained that we’d have to make some sacrifices as a family if we were going all in on the dance. Not having a big house is one of those sacrifices.”

Those conversations were basically practice rounds for the big one. When Dawn and I sat Lotus down during “The Nutcracker” rehearsals we were prepared to keep talking until she fully understood what went into making her dream an ongoing reality.

Lotus set up the ideal environment for the talk without meaning to.

“Why can’t both of you come to all the performances?” she asked one night over dinner after we’d discussed why none of the cast members got free tickets to give to family and friends.

“They’re sold out for every show so it doesn’t make sense for them to give tickets away,” I explained. “One of us will be there for every performance and we’ll be there together for opening night. But we both have jobs so we have to split the other shows up to fit our work schedules.”

“Your dad and I work hard so that you can take all the classes and workshops you need to take and compete in so many regional events...and the nationals every year,” Dawn added. “It costs a lot of money.”

“How much?” our inquisitive daughter wanted to know.

Dawn and I looked at each other. We knew there was only so much Lotus could grasp where money was concerned so we needed to be careful. The reality was that we were already spending about twenty thousand a year, considerably more than the other Dancensations parents. Lotus knew the price of



clothes and video games and things like cell phones because she saw the ads on television and online but an amount as large as twenty thousand dollars would be hard for even the smartest ten year old to grasp.

“The exact amount isn’t important,” I said. “The important thing is that Mom and I don’t do a lot of things or buy a lot of things we used to because that money goes toward dance. We’ve talked about this before, you know.”

“Dad and I aren’t rich like some of the other parents,” Dawn told her, “and there are things we have to give up so we can invest the money we’d spend on those things on *you*.”

“What things?” Lotus asked.

“Things like going out with our friends or going away for weekends,” Dawn said. “We don’t make enough money to do those things *and* pay for everything that’s involved in dance.”

The last thing we wanted was to make Lotus feel guilty about the sacrifices her parents made for her. We just wanted her to understand our situation.

“We’re committed to putting you and dance first,” I told her. “You made a choice and we’re doing everything we can to support that choice. Do you understand?”

“I think so,” she replied slowly but the puzzled look on her face belied her words and I realized that the conversation wasn’t quite over.

“A lot of your friends go on great vacations with their families every year and always go someplace fun for spring breaks,” I said, echoing what Lotus often pointed out to Dawn and me. “Their parents buy them a lot of things they don’t really need. We can’t go to those places or buy many of those things for you because if we did, we couldn’t afford to spend what we do on dance. Everything you do in dance costs money.”

“Like what?” our curious child wanted to know.

*All In*

“Well, let’s see,” I replied. “We pay for all your classes at the studio and private lessons with choreographers. We pay entry fees for every competition and intensive workshop you take part in. We also spend money on hotels and meals and travel for every event. Then there are your rehearsals and costumes. When you add it all up, we spend a lot of money every month.”

Lotus didn’t respond and we could tell she was trying to absorb things she’d never really thought about before. Dawn gave her a moment before elaborating on what I’d said.

“Don’t think we’re complaining,” she said. “Dad and I *want* to invest this money in you. Nobody’s forcing us to do it. We’ll never scrimp on the things you need like clothes and school supplies or computers and phones. But you need to understand that when we tell you we can’t do something or go somewhere or buy you something that catches your eye it isn’t because we don’t want to. We wish we could give you everything you ask for but the truth is, we just can’t. All three of us have to make some sacrifices and your dad and I know it’ll pay off in the end.”

Lotus took it all in and seemed to grasp what we told her but we’ve still had to have the same conversation periodically over the past four years. That’s to be expected and we figure it will happen more and more now that she’s a teenager. But Dawn and I are patient so if Lotus needs refresher courses, we won’t hesitate to give them.

\* \* \*

“Remember when things were simpler and all she wanted every year for Christmas and her birthday was a little brother or sister?” Dawn asked me after a recent rerun of the financial discussion.

“Sure I do,” I said. “I also remember every word of *that* big talk.”

Dawn and I had discussed the possibility having at least one more child after we got married. After her thirty-seventh birthday her doctor told her that if she wanted more children she needed to do it soon because her biological clock was ticking loudly. We had a long discussion that night after her appointment.

“It’s up to you, Tim,” she told me. “I’m fine either way.”

“I don’t need to have a biological daughter or son,” I said after a thoughtful pause. “Lotus *is* my daughter and I honestly don’t think I could ever love another child as much as I love her. There just wouldn’t be enough love for me to give. No other child could ever live up to her in my eyes and that wouldn’t be fair.”

“Are you absolutely sure?” she asked.

“Yes,” I answered.

When Lotus brought the subject up again just before her tenth birthday—around the time of the “other talk”—Dawn thought I should do the talking. I chose my words very carefully.

“Look, Lotus,” I started. “There’s just not enough of Mom and me to go around for another you in the family. All of our focus is on you.”

“What does that mean?” she asked. “Can’t we afford it?”

“It’s not about money,” I told her. “It’s about the time and effort we devote to you and to your dance. If we had another child, we couldn’t do that. We just wouldn’t be able to give you what you have now. We’re focusing everything on you.”

“Does that make sense to you?” Dawn asked our daughter.

“I guess so,” Lotus answered. She’s never brought it up again and Dawn and I have never questioned our decision. If

*All In*

things were different and we weren't so completely focused on the dance world, we might have had more kids. But we've made a commitment and we're happy with it. That's what being all in means. While Lotus understands why she's an only child, we see her with the younger kids at the studio and at competitions and know she'd have made a great big sister.

We also know that it's not easy for her to see how her friends live and not want what they have. It's not easy for *us* not to be able to give her those things but what we *are* able to give her is our unconditional love and support. Those are priceless intangibles that not all of her friends have, sad to say. As Lotus gets older and more mature, she'll understand that her friends who live in big houses or will be presented with a new BMW when they get their driver's licenses don't necessarily have fairy tale lives.

Dawn and I are determined to teach her that *stuff* isn't really important. She already knows and appreciates that we're a loving family. So many of her friends' parents are divorced and many of those kids have stepmothers, stepfathers, stepbrothers, stepsisters and even half siblings. They're shuttled back and forth between lives, which can be confusing and lead to all kinds of problems. Lotus knows that she has a solid family life with parents she can always count on to be there. That's more valuable than any material possession we could buy her.

\* \* \*

Before you start thinking that Dawn and I live like a couple of poor Cinderellas, let me set the record straight. It's true that ninety percent of our disposable income goes to Lotus and her dance and as of this book's writing that's about thirty-five thousand dollars a year. But there's still ten percent that we spend on non-essentials for ourselves and we have a lot of

fun. Neither of us needs much extra but we enjoy a few evenings a year out with friends and I play a round of golf now and then on a public course. That's a thorn in the side of a few old pals who think paying a hundred and fifty dollars for a full round of golf somehow makes the game better.

"Thanks but no thanks," I always tell them in a good-humored way. They just shake their heads and remind me that if I weren't spending so much money on Lotus's dance dream, I could play on any course I wanted to.

"You know what?" I respond. "Even if I didn't spend the money on dance stuff, even if I had millions of dollars, I still wouldn't spend a hundred and fifty dollars for a round of golf. It's just throwing money away. I can play golf for twenty-five or thirty dollars at a good course but if you want to pay a country club this kind of money, be my guest."

They'll never get it. I'm not a miser but I'd never be comfortable throwing money away on something I consider frivolous and kind of ridiculous. There must be a hundred country clubs and exclusive golf courses within a fifty-mile range of our home and I don't think one of them is under fifty grand to join and another one or two thousand a month in fees. There's a minimum charge to have access to the restaurant even if you never eat there. In my mind, it's crazy to spend seventy-five grand a year to be a member of a country club even if you're there every day.

But that's just me.

Some Saturday mornings Lotus will say, "Don't you want to go play golf with your friends?"

"Nope," I tell her honestly. "I won't play any better on an expensive course than I do on a cheaper one and I'm not going to spend a lot of money just to swing a golf club.

I don't have to be out there with them today. We'll get together another time."

*All In*

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Dawn and I know that my buddies aren't alone in thinking that we have a few screws loose when it comes to dance. We take a lot of good-natured kidding from all sides and we never let it bother us. Our attitude is simple: We can explain it to you but we can't *understand it for you*. No one who hasn't walked in our shoes will ever get it.

There are times when we feel like we're the only parents in the world willing to make the kind of sacrifices we do for our child and it's hard for us to understand why all parents aren't willing to do the same. A meeting of dance parents Dawn took part in during a regional weekend dance workshop Lotus attended in the fall of 2013 opened our eyes to how things are for a lot of families.

"I wish I'd been there," I said when she described it to me.

"The man who led the meeting gave us some great advice about picking and choosing the events our kids participate in," she said.

\* \* \*

I could have used some good advice when I'd recently had to lay down the law to Lotus when she didn't see why we couldn't travel to ten Elite Dancer events she'd been invited to participate in. She was signed up for one in Reston, VA—less than forty-five minutes from Alexandria—but three others she "really needed" to attend were in Connecticut, Western Tennessee and Boston. The two of us had made a trip to one of these events in Boston the weekend after the 2013 Fourth of July. While it was exciting and beneficial for Lotus's future as a dancer, it took a big bite out of my wallet.

“My fees will be paid for, Dad,” Lotus pointed out when I told her there was no way we could afford for her to participate in all ten events.

“But that’s the only thing that’s free,” I countered. “We’re looking at gas for really long drives to and from these cities. You’d have to miss a whole day of school on Fridays and we wouldn’t get back until really late on Sunday so you’d be dragging on Monday. And that’s not all. Between the hotels and gas and meals and costumes, I’d be spending about seven hundred and fifty dollars for each event. We can’t spend that kind of money.”

I had to be the voice of reason but I wished Lotus could take part in all ten events. Being chosen to assist Elite Dancers who had been finalists in the very popular “So You Think You Can Dance” television series was a great opportunity for her. The young instructors were familiar to millions of people and idolized by kids with their own dance dreams. The Master Classes they taught filled up almost immediately, partly because the students who signed up were, as Lotus had when she was ten and eleven, serious about dance. Some of the other kids signed up just so they could go home and tell their friends they’d danced with a TV celebrity.

Lotus had been one of seven younger dancers from across the country invited to participate in the Boston event. It was quite an honor, especially considering the fact that she was only thirteen and most of the other assistants were sixteen and seventeen. She went from room to room helping teach the twelve and thirteen-year old Master Class students from three until seven each day.

I was unbelievably proud to watch my thirteen-year old daughter helping the three All Star instructors teach quick choreography numbers with such confidence. She made such a good impression in Boston that I wasn’t at all surprised she’d

*All In*

been invited to participate in similar weekends but it was still out of the question.

It was hard for Lotus to accept it and she was clearly disappointed but she took it in stride and I hope she learned a valuable lesson. Just because we want something badly doesn't mean we always get it. I believe that knowing and understanding this will give her an advantage when she's older. She'll know how the world can be, something many her friends will be shocked to learn when they become adults, if they ever learn it at all.

\* \* \*

"Checking out all the competitions and workshops before we sign Lotus up is something we've always been careful about," I reminded Dawn. "Don't you think we spend enough time making sure they're the best?"

"Probably not as much as we should," she replied. "Look how many things there are to choose from every single weekend. The workshops and intensives and competitions keep multiplying every year. The last thing we need is to have Lotus's name associated with someone who has a bad reputation because it will reflect badly on her."

"You're right," I said. "Dance is getting to be like the housing market. It's getting glutted and until some of these smaller groups go out of business or get bought by a big company, we have to keep our eyes open. Most of the people sponsoring these events are honest but we need to do everything we can to avoid the ones who aren't. What else did this man have to say?"

"He pretty much explained how we can avoid the bad apples and he put it in a way everybody in the room could understand," Dawn said. "He compared it to buying a new car. If you're looking to buy a fifteen thousand dollar vehicle or



one that costs twenty-five or thirty thousand, you're going to want to know everything you're getting for that money. He said we should do the same with every competition and workshop we look at in terms of what we're getting for our time and money investment. Who's choreographing, who's teaching the classes, who's good with kids and who might be involved we wouldn't want to be associated with."

Dawn told me that toward the end of the session, the man leading it went from person to person and asked what they spent on their children's dance every year. A few answered "ten thousand" and a few more said "fifteen thousand." Then he got to Dawn.

"I told him that I preferred not to share that," she said.

"Why didn't you tell him?" I asked.

"I guess I'm just not comfortable talking about it," she admitted. "You and I know it's a lot and so do the other parents but it's really nobody's business but ours."

\* \* \*

I agree with Dawn's attitude a hundred percent. We've had friendships end because we can't afford to do a lot of socializing. The people who make much more money than we do but don't spend nearly what we do on dance sometimes take it the wrong way. They get it in their heads that we're dropping them, which is the furthest thing from the truth, and they resent us. I'm sorry they feel that way but at the end of the day it's their problem, not ours. Too many of the things they do and just take for granted that everyone does are expensive. They've never had any experience with watching their money carefully or making sacrifices. Hey, I'd love to be in that position but until I am, my priorities are clear. A busy social calendar isn't one of them.

*All In*

That said, Dawn and I enjoy our lives. We have fun. Sometimes it even pays off.

Case in point: I accompanied Lotus and Dawn to a dance workshop intensive in January of 2011. Since it was in Atlantic City I figured I'd find some time during the weekend to enjoy a little poker with a little of our disposable income that wasn't earmarked for dance. Having entered my share of poker tournaments during my single days I don't mind telling you that I did pretty well. Of course, when I came home a winner I blew every cent of my winnings on things I can't even remember wanting.

But time changes all of us. When I learned that the Taj Mahal casino was hosting a no limit poker tournament with a three hundred dollar buy-in, I wasn't thinking about the thrill of winning or splurging on a custom

set of golf clubs. No, I was thinking of the next five regional competitions that were going to set us back a thousand dollars per event. How nice it would be to let poker defray at least some of that tab.

To make a long story short, I stayed up all night at the poker table and turned my three hundred dollar investment into two thousand—enough to cover two of the five competitions Lotus was signed up for. I could have stayed at the table and kept playing, possibly turning that two thousand into a lot more. But I didn't. I walked away with my winnings and the satisfaction of knowing the money was going to a great cause.

“Are you kidding?!” Lotus and Dawn shouted simultaneously when they saw my cash pile the next morning. They were blown away, especially Dawn. She'd heard all the stories from my old pals about what I was notorious for doing with my winnings. But she knew what my plan for the tournament was all along—to win as much as I could and invest it in dance.

*My Amazing Journey as a Dance Dad*

It was more satisfying than any win I've had before or since.

\* \* \*

I happen to like our three-bedroom townhouse and our neighborhood a lot but as I've mentioned, it's far from being one of the mansions or estates that some of the other dance parents own. But it's got something that none of those big houses have, something most of the kids who live in them would give anything *to* have. The Colley home has the Lotus Lounge.

Seriously, how many kids have an upscale sports bar/entertainment center just for teenagers in their homes? With a blinking neon "Open" sign on the door? With big screen TVs and surround sound, a great selection of games, a fully stocked non-alcoholic bar and an ice machine? I only know one: Lotus Colley.

When the Lotus Lounge opened in the summer of 2013 it was a huge hit with every kid who experienced it first hand. The buzz spread through the studio and Lotus's school like a viral Youtube video until everyone wanted to be invited to hang out there. I hoped Lotus and her friends would like it but this reminded me of the public clamor to get in the newest hot club in D.C.

"I've got a surprise in mind for Lotus," I told Dawn when the idea came to me.

"What are you up to?" she asked when she saw the grin on my face and the excitement in my eyes.

"Something I think she's going to love so much that she'll never complain about not being able to have a lot of friends over for parties," I said. "She's going to have her own sports bar."

"*Sports bar?*" Dawn almost shouted.

*All In*

“Yeah...kind of like a Damon’s just for kids, only cooler.” I told her. “Maybe it’s more like an entertainment center but sports bar sounds so much better.” As I described what I had in mind, Dawn became as excited about it as I was. When she saw the final product, she was completely blown away.

I started by taking all my workout equipment out of the basement. That gave me an even bigger space than I thought I’d have to work with so I started creating the Lotus Lounge with as much enthusiasm as I’ve ever put into a project. First up was a long kid-friendly granite bar with a refrigerator for soft drinks and snack storage, and leather bar stools. Then I installed two big screen TVs and a sound system that equaled the quality of the best grownup bars and clubs. I finished it off with several games and the neon sign.

All modesty aside, the Lotus Lounge turned out beautifully. It took a lot of hard work over countless hours but it was worth every minute of labor and every penny I spent. In addition to building the bar and buying the entertainment equipment, I rewired the entire basement and ran brand new water lines in behind the bar (with Lotus’s help, I might add). When it was finally finished I surveyed my work with the satisfaction and pride that comes from a job well done... and more importantly, a job motivated by love.

“I guess my blue-collar background and all the prop dad stuff I’ve done have their advantages,” I said.

“That’s the understatement of the year,” Dawn replied. “This is as cool as any place I’ve ever gone to—maybe cooler! She’s going to love it. What kid wouldn’t?”

Every kid *has* and they all want to spend as much time in the Lotus Lounge as they can. I think some of them would move in if we let them. But none of her friends love it as much

as Lotus. It's *her* place. She's had three parties so far and has a lot more planned.

"I can't believe you did this, Dad," Lotus said in something close to awe when she saw how I'd completely transformed the basement.

"It's the best present anybody ever got. Can I decorate it with some special stuff?"

"It's your place, Lotus," I said. "You can do anything you want with it."

"Then I want to put up some of your bowling plaques and trophies and pictures," she announced.

"I think I threw all those things out years ago," I said, surprised and touched that she'd want to display them for her friends to see.

"No you didn't," she told me. "I know where they are and I want to put them up."

"Why?" I honestly wanted to know.

"Because bowling was your dream just like dancing is mine," she said. "I know how much it meant to you. I know how good you were when you were my age. Remember all the talks we used to have about it?"

Of course I did. I remembered every word of those conversations and the emotions they brought to the surface. We look at where she is in her dance career and how it parallels where I was in bowling at the same age. Lotus remembered them as clearly as I did.

"You told me one time that you thought you knew where you were going and how you'd spend the rest of your life," she reminded me. "But it didn't work out that way and you said it's because people can't predict the future."

"What else did I say?" I asked.

"You told me that I could never get conceited because no one knows what's going to happen or how good I could get to

*All In*

be,” she repeated my words verbatim. “You said that when you were my age you looked at the adults who’d made it in bowling and knew that’s where you wanted to be. So you worked really hard every day to get better.”

“And before I knew it I was meeting those people and competing with them,” I recalled. “My hard work paid off just like yours will. The only difference is that there’s a great career ahead of you in dance if you want it. Just take it as it comes.”

“I’ll never forget those talks, Dad,” Lotus assured me. “You had to give up your dream and you want to make sure I won’t ever have to do the same thing. I just want all my friends to see how successful you were.”

I can’t tell you how much those words meant to me. Lotus didn’t just love having her unique club; she was proud of my accomplishments and wanted all her friends to know about them. I can’t give her the world on a silver platter but I *was* able to give her a special gift that came from the heart. The happiness it brought her was all the thanks I needed.

By the way, Lotus sometimes lets Dawn and me invite our friends over to enjoy the Lotus Lounge but only when it’s not crowded with teenagers.

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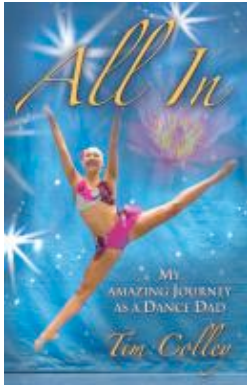
Dawn and I know that we look at life differently than other parents both in and out of the dance world. We do things our way. We make decisions as a family. Lotus spends her time away from school dancing not because she has to but because she *wants* to. It makes her happy. She understands about choices and sacrifices because we’ve helped her see that being able to support her dream makes *us* happy, no matter what we might have to give up in order to do that.

So what if we don’t go to Europe for two weeks every summer? So what if we don’t have a swimming pool in the

*My Amazing Journey as a Dance Dad*

back yard or belong to some exclusive country club? Those things aren't important to the Colley family because they're just things. We're doing what makes us happy and if no one else ever understands that, so be it. We don't need anyone's understanding or approval. Our priorities are clear and our path leads straight to our shared goal. I wonder how many people can honestly say that.

Can you? I think it'll be worth the time it takes to give that simple question some serious thought. You might surprise yourself.



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