



## Retailer Spotlight

### From Dance to Decor

*By Nicole Leinbach Reyhle*

### How one storeowner brought an ailing dance store back to life

With glazed raspberry walls, accents of gray and plum, crystal chandeliers and marble countertops, Allegro Dance Boutique could easily be mistaken for a swanky hotel lobby. But there is more to the freshly renovated boutique than a great decor. The Evanston, IL-based store is fully stocked with carefully selected apparel to meet the needs of dancers, gymnasts and skaters, and its attractive accessories are enough to lure in any fashion-savvy woman.

Previously located just four doors down from its current location, the shop used to be called Before The Ballet. Victoria Lyman, Allegro's current owner, worked there part-time during college. As an active dancer at the time she provided the previous owner with direction and insight into the world of dance—something the owner knew little about. Upon graduation, Lyman took a sales position with Eurotard while continuing to work at Before The Ballet. She and the previous owner would joke that Lyman herself should be running the show. In January 2007, the “joke” became a reality when Lyman purchased the business. “I had been there for years and saw the potential,” she says. “The business was dying, but there was opportunity.” Less than three years later, her industry experience and eye for style have transformed the basic supply shop into a thriving downtown boutique.

### A Fresh Start

Lyman's first challenge was to expand the assortment of products. Her vision of a dance store was more than just a supply warehouse of basics. She wanted to target everyone from little girls to grown women with fun fashions and necessities, and she wanted to cater not just to dancers, but also to gymnasts and ice-skaters. From years of experience at the store, Lyman knew there were merchandise voids she could fill. “We said ‘no’ to a lot of people who needed a lot of things,” she says. “People only came in to get something they needed and then they left. I knew I could change that.”

Now the store sells a range of accessories, including gloves and hats, and it will be adding high-end leotards this year. The apparel categories also have grown in response to clientele requests and now include more trendy dancewear designs, as well as adult gymnastics wear (the store previously only carried children's gym wear) and a larger assortment of ice-skating products.

The next thing on Lyman's to-do list was a name change that would reflect the fresh product variety and appeal to a broader audience. Lyman held a contest for customers to give their suggestions, and she ultimately found inspiration in a name that reached a broad base of customers. She and her employees decided on “Allegro Dance Boutique—Apparel for Bodies In Motion” as the new store name.

Still, the decor and energy of Before The Ballet lingered, and the limited inventory space was inadequate to house all the new products. As luck would have it, Lyman found a solution just down the road. A storefront only four doors away became available. In August 2009, her business was relocated into a fresh space, and along with a crew of friends and family, including her decorator mom, Lyman renovated the entire place to her specifications.

### **A New Look**

The store's transformation was finished in a matter of months. The store design now matches its product offering and has something for everyone. One section is dedicated to little dancers: Bubblegum pink tulle drapes a doorway leading into a small room filled from floor to ceiling with all things girly. With classic pink ballet tights, an assortment of tutus, children's dance placemats, stuffed animals, key chains and more, the room is affectionately referred to by Lyman's youngest customers as "the princess room." Plush pink rugs cover the wooden floors, letting little girls comfortably run around in excitement as they pick out their next favorite thing.

Back in the main store, the chic central location has been designed with teenagers and women in mind. From hair accessories to jewelry to fishnet tights worn for dance or fun, the range of products means that even non-dancers enjoy shopping at the store. "In this new location, customers really respond to the boutique," Lyman says. "I wanted a place where friends want to shop together—where they would walk around and browse. It's cool to see people shopping like they do at normal clothing stores."

Lyman has also kept her customers' needs in mind by dedicating additional space to fitting rooms. She knew people would need more than the single dressing room that the old store had, so she built three, including a family-size room that comfortably fits a stroller, a mom and a handful of little girls ready to try on piles of leotards.

### **A Quick Success**

New customers, old customers and local dance studios have been shopping at the relocated dance boutique, so Lyman has been busy. A team of associates who are all active dancers helps smooth the transition, which means they can offer valuable support to Allegro's patrons. Having her associates involved in the dance world—and being involved in it herself—is important to Lyman. "Classes keep me up-to-date on dancers' needs. I don't blindly follow the manufacturers' suggested trends, since I'm out there in the community learning firsthand what people want," Lyman says. "Sometimes I buy things I don't personally like but think my customers will. The previous owner only had basics, and I realized you couldn't have a super-successful store with just that. I get what I think is nice and what customers need, but I also try to be open-minded to what an 8-year-old may like."

Having rejuvenated an ailing store, Lyman now looks forward to growing her business by networking in her dance community through business-to-business marketing and other community outreach. "I know where my customers are. They are at the dance studios and ice rinks and gymnastic centers. So I go there directly. It's about being out there, being face-to-face, and telling them what I can do for them," she says.

Whether dressing a toddler, tween, teenager or woman, Allegro Dance Boutique caters to the needs of its customers in both product assortment and shopping experience. Growth looks positive. There are just a couple more problems to tackle at the moment--how will Lyman keep up with the constant flow of traffic entering her store? And when will she find time to dance?

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