

THIRD PLACE RECIPIENT

Leaps Toward Integrity

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The long line of dancers and instructors reminded me that dance conventions aren't as glamorous as they're made out to be. Stacks of paperwork and rapid keyboard typing. It was time to finalize our registration for an international competition.

The staff member ordered us to step up. As she went through the list of routines, she stopped at my choreography. "Can you confirm your birthday? We don't seem to have it on file for some reason." She directed her attention towards me. I was suddenly cut off by my instructor, who stated the incorrect year. That placed me in the wrong age division and made my competition much younger than me. At first, I gave my instructor the benefit of the doubt and assumed she made a mistake. My face began turning the same shade of red as the sequined duffel bag slung over my shoulder. I opened my mouth to correct her, but before I could, the employee handed us our wristbands and called over the next person in line.

Feeling confused, I pulled my instructor aside. "You registered my birthday wrong. We'll have to correct it on competition day," I said. She glanced around the room, then leaned in and whispered, "I'm entering you in this division so we can beat their studio." I froze, trying to process what I was just told. I never viewed my teacher as someone who would bend the rules for a simple win.

As the countdown to competition grew shorter, the situation consumed me. I couldn't even focus on why I was there: to dance and perform. An hour before I was set to take the stage, I finalized my decision. If I stayed silent, I would be complicit in an unfair advantage, but come out victorious. If I spoke up, I'd be disqualified from the competition, jeopardizing our studio's reputation and credibility. And while the first option seemed far less complicated, a win without integrity wasn't something I desired. "Excuse me?" I said quietly to the nearest staff member I could find. "I think I'm in the wrong age category." She glanced up from her clipboard. "Oh, let me check. Errors like these are pretty common." I shook my head. "This wasn't an error. My instructor put me in the wrong division on purpose" Moments later, I was informed I was disqualified.

After that, my relationship with my teammates grew apart, my instructor confronted me, and I felt invisible in the very classes where I once belonged. In the end, I decided to leave that studio. Even though I lost both the trophy and my team, I walked away with something far more meaningful. Self-respect, integrity, and the decision that ultimately led me to my current dance team. One built on values and character that mirror my own.