

Generation Peace Academy Wows the New York World of Ballroom Dance

Ariana Moon, Yoshie Manaka, Sachie Kawachi and Ami Stair
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Members of Generation Peace Academy (GPA) look on as fellow competitors take the dance floor.

Members of the Generation Peace Academy (GPA) shined on and off the dance floor at the World Promotions New York City Ball (NYCB) ballroom dance competition at the Sheraton Towers on May 12, 2012. The biyearly competition attracts some of New York's best dancers and spans various levels of dancing from Newcomer to Professional. Yet, what the event's organizer and master of ceremonies, Andrew Smart, found more impressive than the dancing was the spirit of good sportsmanship among the GPA competitors.

"We were delighted to have GPA involved at the event," he said. "They bring enthusiasm, good manners and such a strong feeling of camaraderie. The most important thing to me is that they were so supportive of one another. Of course, it's a competition and everybody wants to win, but everybody was cheering one another on. We really appreciate GPA's coming and their support, and we hope to see them again soon!"

The first NYCB was held on Mother's Day in 2011, and GPA has since enrolled to compete in all three of the NYCB's that have taken place. Last Saturday [May 12, 2012], 48 GPA couples, most of whom had received only two months of ballroom-dance training from Ariana Moon, competed in a category titled "Generation Peace," which included the dances Chacha, Swing and Salsa. Through a process of gradual elimination, 20 GPA couples competed in the quarter-final round, 12 in the semi-final round and six in the finals. The final six couples, each of whom was awarded a medal, were the following from first to sixth place: Mitshiro Abe and Hana Hendricks, Julie Owens and Josh Hunter, Masahiro Abe and Rebecca Mock, Ren Bishop and Eika Davis, Takahiro Sakaguchi and Marina Stana, and Young Kwan Hirata and Alexa Sensini.

Lessons Learned from Ballroom Dancing

Brian Tassej, a GPA first-year trainee, expressed pride in representing Lovin' Life, Rev. In Jin Moon and the Unification Church. "I could really feel the way the judges were inspired by our attitude," he said. "They were saying that no other group that comes to the competition is ever as excited and supportive of other competitors as we are. For them to be that inspired by us showed me that we can really represent Lovin' Life Ministries well and that based on our actions, we can show people what the Unification church, Lovin' Life and Generation Peace Academy is all about and be the kind of people Rev. In Jin

Moon wants us to be. This was the first ballroom competition I'd ever been in, and it was a really exciting experience."



Alexa Sensini and Young Kwon Hirata took home medals for sixth place in the Chacha, Salsa and Swing.

Rather than reserving supportive cheers for their fellow Unificationist competitors, all members of GPA cheered for each couple that took the dance floor, whether of ages four or ninety-one. GPA coordinator Keimi Kanno said, "In the competitive world, where everybody is competing for themselves, GPA supports everyone. Nobody is better than anybody else for any particular reason, and everyone deserves support and love, and the organizers appreciate that. That's why they keep inviting us back."

Several GPA couples ventured beyond the "Generation Peace" category to compete with couples from all over the nation in other categories. Johanna Fleischman, a first-year GPA member who had participated in the NYCB last fall, said, "This competition was more enjoyable because I participated in dance categories beyond that of the Chacha, Swing and Salsa of 'Generation Peace.' At first I wasn't going to, but then I decided take the opportunity and accept the blessings and gifts that Jin Sung Nim and Ariana were giving us. In retrospect, I was grateful that I did.

"This year, ballroom has taught me a lot about mind set. Even though I enjoy ballroom as I'm doing it, when I'm not dancing, it's hard to appreciate what's been given to us. Free ballroom lessons are virtually nonexistent. When I came back for the third module, I made the decision to enjoy ballroom and not let it be just something that I had to do. The competition really helped me actualize that. A few weeks ago, I began to realize that I really do enjoy ballroom. It's something that can bring people closer together and help build stronger relationships, and it really helped make this GPA group more comfortable with one another. I strongly agree with everything Jin Sung Nim and Ariana are saying about how it's an incredible way to make great brother-sister relationships."

"In Love" with Ballroom Dance

"I started learning ballroom dance about four months ago, when the second Leadership Module started," said Philadelphia-resident and GPA competitor Mike Diamond. "I am a very uncoordinated guy, but for some reason, I was really attracted to the idea of ballroom dancing. I wanted to become good at it. Well, good is an overstatement. I set the goal of achieving mediocrity in ballroom dancing by the end of the module -- I didn't want to set my sights too high at that point.

"I fell in love with ballroom. The ideas of being graceful and strong, learning to be a good leader through an activity that supports good brother-sister interaction was highly appealing. I see the Ballroom Ministry as being truly capable of being a counter-culture to the standard of dance seen in most schools known as 'bumping and grinding.' It disgusted me in high school, and it disgusts me now. But ballroom dancing is

a very cool, elegant, skillful activity that can receive interest from all peoples. I have witnessed this during our weekly “Ballroom in Harlem” outreach program, for which I go to Pastor Glenda Phillips-Lee's International Gospel Helpers Church to help teach ballroom with our Rev. Sakamoto. It has been a very rewarding experience seeing people from all backgrounds learning and getting excited about ballroom dance.



The finalists for the "Generation Peace" category proudly sport their medals together with instructors Ariana Moon and Dr. Jin Sung Park (far left).

“All this would not have been possible without our Ballroom Ministry and Ariana being the excellent teacher that she is. It has allowed me to find a new passion in my life that I will keep until the day I die -- (and perhaps beyond. I hope to be able to dance with my wife even when I am old. At the competition, the oldest contestant was 91 years old. That was when I realized that I could truly dance for the rest of my life. I competed in the GPA category, but I also competed in the Newcomer Chacha categories. It was an amazing experience. I have never been a confident dancer, but my dance partner, Eika Davis, encouraged me and gave me extra practice lessons to help me. It was hard work, but every day I could see and feel my technique improving. Saturday, I competed, and to my complete surprise, I placed first in Newcomer Chacha. I was absolutely shocked. This really has encouraged me to keep practicing hard at ballroom dancing. I have now upped my original goal of achieving mediocrity. If it wasn't for Lovin' Life Ministries and Ariana, none of this would have ever been possible. I am grateful for this experience and ballroom dancing. It has changed my life forever.”

Aika Greenidge, a first-year GPA competitor from California said, “At first I didn't want to compete, but in the end, it was worth it. It was so exciting. I've done recitals for piano, but I've never done a dance competition before. Of course, my partner and I got into a competitive spirit, but it was always more about going out there and having a good time. While we were performing, I could tell that was the most energy we ever had together. I found myself practicing for hours and hours, trying to work through our steps and make everything work out, even though it was easy to get frustrated. I learned about patience, which will prepare me for marriage and for the future.”

The GPA participants weren't the only ones who received awards that evening. Dr. Jin Sung Park was also awarded with a trophy and the title “Ambassador of Dance.”



(From left to right) Dr. Jin Sung Park, Ariana Moon, world-class dancers Olga and Paul Richardson and Anna Smart (wife of Andrew Smart) celebrate Dr. Jin Sung Park's "Ambassador of Dance" award.

“That was completely out of the blue!” said Kanno. “It was really significant, because it’s a physical acknowledgement on the part of World Promotions of what they think we bring to the ballroom culture.”

Smart, who presented the award, said, “An ‘Ambassador of Dance’ is somebody who is bringing dancing to the next generation. We’re giving this award to Dr. Park, even though we know that Ariana does all the work. We want her to see this as an incentive, so she’ll be motivated to keep working hard. If she keeps it up, we’ll give her the award next year.”

An evening gala followed the competition, with showcases by some of New York’s best dancers, after which GPA then packed up to drive to Washington, D.C. for a Mother’s Day Sunday service.