

## Dancing Queen: Courtney Celeste Spears' Journey From Artist to Businesswoman

By MIA AGOSTINELLI and  
ALYSSA MACALUSO  
Staff Writer and Copy Editor

Dancer, actress, model, writer, entrepreneur, teacher and now businesswoman: Courtney Celeste Spears, Fordham College at Lincoln Center '16, is a master at turning her dreams into reality and is determined to use her platform to change the world.

A full-time dancer at The Ailey School in New York City and a dance teacher, Spears recently graduated from the Harvard Business School's Crossover Into Business program in April. The exclusive program — which offers mentorship to full-time professional athletes desiring to sharpen their business skills — allows their students to make connections, learn critical information about business and broaden their skill sets. Spears is one of the three dancers to attend the program this year and the first dancer from Ailey to graduate from it.

The time she spent teaching at Ailey II, the junior dance company, inspired her to share her passion with young dancers in the Caribbean. In 2017, she founded her own business named ArtSea Dance in the Bahamas with the mission of doing just that, and decided to attend the Harvard program to improve her business skills. She described business as “a weaker point of my knowledge, and so I thought ‘Well, why not make it stronger? Why not be able to be in (the role of business owner) and know what I’m talking about in a deeper sense?’”

This ambition to do everything to the fullest extent possible is a common thread that twirls and weaves throughout Spears' life: “I’ve always been someone who did my best to go the extra mile, to go a little bit beyond what was required.”

Like many dancers, Spears started dancing at the age of three. As she grew older, dance remained a central part of her life. “I don’t remember a day in my life when I was not dancing,” Spears said.

Spears was first introduced to The Ailey School by a teacher at her high school, the Baltimore School for the Arts. She fell in love with both Manhattan and Ailey, and said that continuing her training and education through the Fordham-Ailey Bachelor of Fine Arts (BFA) program was a no brainer.

The Jesuit values of Fordham have coincided with her belief in God and her strong Christian values.

Spears was accepted into the Fordham-Ailey BFA program in 2012 and graduated four years later with a BFA in fine arts and a minor in communication and media studies. In addition to her official degree, Spears mastered life skills in her undergraduate years that gave her the tools to make her dreams reality.

One skill in particular was time management. Spears reflected on her packed schedule as an Fordham-Ailey student, constantly commuting between the two campuses, and how it helped her manage her busy life now. “It was tough ... When I start to feel overwhelmed because I have my hands in too many things, I remember that ‘You used to be at Fordham and Ailey from 8 in the morning until 10:30 in the evening: You have the tools to manage this.’”

In addition to classes, Spears also actively involved herself in Ailey’s administrative side. She was the official student worker for the BFA program for two years, giving tours to prospective BFA students and refining the clerical skills that would later guide her business endeavors.

“My life has always been this weird balance of dance and business,” Spears reflected, “or dance and my other interests ... but I’ve always been someone with my hands in a lot of things at one time.”

Spears described herself as having a “hustle mentality.” She explained, “I never saw myself — (and) I still don’t see myself — as the best dancer in the room. I don’t see myself as the smartest kid in class. I don’t see myself as the best in any scenario, so my defense or safety net has been, ‘You just need to be as good as you can at all of it, and that’s going to be your package.’”

For Spears, her ambitious mindset contributed to her success. In her junior year at Fordham, she auditioned and was selected to join Ailey II. She spent her final two years at Fordham traveling with the dance team while also completing the necessary work to graduate with a degree from Fordham.

Her life in the post-college world has been nothing less than remarkable. Using the skills she learned at Fordham, she has been able to work in a variety of different fields.

“I think versatility is the most valuable asset that you can have,” Spears said. “You have to be able to do it all at this point in this day and age.”

And she is doing exactly that. Whether founding her own business or increasing her knowledge of other subject areas outside of dance, Spears strives to be versatile. “You can be the journalist and the business person and the artist and the writer all in the same body,” she said. “It just takes that sense of bravery to try and conquer all of it.”

Apart from teaching and running her own business, Spears has extended her career as a model and actress.

For Spears, modeling is different than dance, but in a good way. “I love clothing; I love fashion; I love that world,” she said, and being a model has fulfilled some of her childhood dreams.



Her work in “A Mother’s Rite,” a ballet which was created to honor the mothers whose children are victims of systemic racism, has earned her an Emmy nomination. Produced by the Black Iris Project, a dance collaborative that seeks to uplift Black voices and educate audiences through ballet, and choreographed by founder of the Black Iris Project Jeremy McQueen, the company seeks to uplift the stories whose origins stem from Black culture.

“It was one of the hardest roles I ever have done in my life,” Spears said. “I felt a huge sense of weight and responsibility.” It was imperative that her voice in the play be heard in order to honor all of the women who have experienced racial injustices. The ballet was a way for Spears to speak to her audience through dance and to convey a story addressing systemic inequality and injustice that the world is currently protesting against. “My art form calls for me to be vulnerable, and I am the furthest thing from vulnerable,” Spears said.

Speaking of where her career will go next, Spears is uncertain. “I am trying this new thing where I am just going for it — I am going for whatever I want to do,” Spears said. “I am going to make myself uncomfortable and just try things that are new and different and weird, and just see how they go. That’s how ArtSea got started; that’s how Harvard got started; that’s how modeling got started: just me attacking this feeling of being uncomfortable and scared.”

“I am trying to push myself to be (the person) I needed at a young age,” Spears concluded. “The more I climb, the more I can rally for change and rally for my students, and rally for the dance world. It really all feels like I need to continue building so I can change the world.”



COURTESY OF DENZEL COLANT  
A dancer from a young age, Spears has taken her passions in many different directions, making her a modern day Renaissance woman.

