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Dance Fever

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Dance Fever



How Evan Kasprzak transitioned from roommate to celebrity, all in one hot summer

By GARRETT RAPP '10

Editor's Note: When it was announced in early June that IWU student Evan Kasprzak was among 20 dancers selected to compete on Fox TV's *So You Think You Can Dance*, the news held special interest for Evan's many Wesleyan friends, including Garrett Rapp. Garrett and Evan were first-year roommates and shared a suite their sophomore year. Garrett—who is now a senior English-writing and religion major and editor-in-chief of the *Argus*—writes about Evan's journey from college student to national celebrity.

If you'd asked me during my first year at Illinois Wesleyan about my roommate Evan Kasprzak, I would've told you that he was a really laid-back dude from West Bloomfield, Mich. He was a dancer and a music-theatre major. He and I rarely butted heads (minus one unfortunate thermos-meets-computer incident). He also had a fast, souped-up Subaru WRX that he'd rebuilt himself.



Evan Kasprzak (far right) was among four finalists vying for first place on *So You Think You Can Dance*.

I wouldn't have told you he would become the third-favorite dancer in America.

In the spring of our sophomore year, rumors began to float around that he'd auditioned for Fox TV's *So You Think You Can Dance* (*SYTYCD*). The truth came out that he'd traveled to Milwaukee over break to audition and a bunch of his friends from Illinois Wesleyan gathered the night his audition aired.

On *SYTYCD*, each contestant dances for a panel of judges at different locations around the country. The first of the show's three phases is the audition phase, which is

followed in the second phase by five weeks of the dancers performing in pairs. During this phase, the audience can phone in votes for their favorite couple to grant them immunity, but the final call on who gets eliminated belongs to the judges. In the third phase, the judges lose their authority to decide who remains on the show, and all is determined by the television audience, who vote from home via telephone.

Out of thousands of hopefuls, only a few hundred make it to the second round of eliminations. When Evan survived that round after auditioning in 2008, we screamed, hugged and popped bottles of sparkling grape juice (it was sophomore year, after all) as if he were coming home from a war.

Unfortunately, after staying alive through a few elimination rounds in Las Vegas, he did come home. While comparing Evan to Gene Kelly and Fred Astaire, the judges decided he was not quite ready for the top 20. Instead, they encouraged him to audition again next season.

Evan spent the rest of that summer practicing hard with the Broadway Theatre Project in Tampa, Fla., one of the nation's most prestigious Broadway-style theatre programs, where Evan's older brother, Ryan, teaches. Back at Wesleyan, he choreographed and danced a routine for the Student Choreographed Dance Concert in January, and appeared in multiple numbers for the Faculty Choreographed Dance Concert in March.

During junior year, Evan decided to give *SYTYCD* one more try, and during spring break of 2009 he, along with his brother Ryan, auditioned in Memphis. As Evan's friends and as his self-declared biggest fans, we watched the audition when it aired in June, cheering for the brothers with renewed enthusiasm and laughing at the whoopee-cushion prop that made it into Ryan Kasprzak's tap routine.

The laughs turned to tears for some of us when, despite his popular performance, Ryan was cut from the show — the last person to be sent home before the top 20 dancers were determined. Evan was left to compete on his own. As he went to join the other finalists, his older brother gave him an encouraging shove, saying, "One Kasprzak is better than no Kasprzaks."

As he appeared more and more on the show, I was struck by just how familiar the Evan Kasprzak on TV seemed to me. There was no hammy persona, no exaggerated antics. Instead I saw the same Evan with whom I spent my freshman and sophomore years watching YouTube videos and playing in our band.

That familiar persona stayed palpable all summer. Every Wednesday night, in Bloomington, Ill., I gathered friends and fans at my apartment to watch Evan dance on TV. For the first weeks, he was paired with a dancer named Randi Evans, with whom he performed some of the season's most popular



In his first year at IWU, he took part in another competition: a campus-wide snowball fight. From left are Garrett Rapp, William Hanzel, Kasprzak and Sam Harris. All were class of 2010 Munsell Hall residents. (Photo by Ellyn Drathring '10)

routines. Among these was a touching jazz number about marriage, as well as a judge- and fan-favorite routine inspired by partner Randi's derrière, danced in contemporary style.

Before the second phase was over, it was clear how popular Evan's breezy Broadway flair was with the audience. After voting until our fingers were sore on Wednesday nights, we held our breath every Thursday to see whether he would stay on the show, and week after week he remained safe, a feat that certainly took more votes than we provided. It was only after the final episode — when I saw Internet photos of families voting for Evan while on vacation in Colorado and an entire nursing home in South Carolina wearing “Kasprzactivist” T-shirts — that I realized how many people had been supporting my friend.



For the first weeks of the show, Evan was paired with dancer Randi Evans, with whom he performed some of the season's most popular routines.

That support persisted throughout the show's final weeks. The judges, having lost the power to decide who remained on the show, instead gave their perspective on every dance to help voters make informed choices. Despite their occasionally cutting criticism of Evan, he was the only contestant on the show in season five who never faced the prospect of elimination on Thursday nights. His enormous — and enormously dedicated — fan-base supported him every week, until it was down to the final four contestants.

This past summer, I worked as a writer for IWU's Communications Office. Coverage of Evan's exploits became my responsibility, and I combed the Internet to learn about the public perspective on my former roommate. What I found seemed incredibly opinionated and polarized. While some people posted acerbic condemnations of Evan's dancing, others defended his relaxed, charismatic style. I even found a discussion board where (mostly) young women shared dreams they'd had about Evan and discussed techniques for netting thousands of votes per show by using multiple phones.

In the days before the August 6 finale, we all started to wonder whether he might indeed become America's Favorite Dancer and win the \$250,000 grand prize. Even Evan's detractors began to concede his public esteem, and the show's creator and primary judge, Nigel Lythgoe, declared him “one of the most popular dancers [they'd] ever had on the show.” On that same night, all 3,000 members of the audience at the Kodak Theatre in Hollywood chanted Evan's name after one of his dances.

The Kodak Theatre was packed again a week later for the season finale, when 9.3 million viewers (the show's biggest-ever audience) tuned in. On IWU's campus, dozens of students, staff and faculty crowded into the Minor Myers, jr. Welcome Center auditorium to watch on a big screen. After a tense hour, we learned that America had voted Evan their third-favorite dancer.

When the show's hostess, Cat Deeley, asked Evan how he felt about winning third place, the same winsome personality that all of us knew shined through. He thanked his fans, family and friends. He said he was ecstatic to have made it so far, and he cited working with the show's award-winning choreographers as one of his favorite experiences. "It's been an awesome journey," he said, "and I couldn't ask for anything else."

His friends can't ask for anything else, either. We look forward to welcoming the same old Evan we know back to school in spring and to watching him perform on the Wesleyan stage. When we last spoke to him (through a voice-communication tool in his favorite computer game, *World of Warcraft*), he sounded a bit tired. After a few weeks at home, he had just flown back to LA to rehearse for a nationwide *SYTYCD* tour, which will travel to 40 cities this fall.

When the tour is over, Evan has stated that he will return to campus in January to finish his bachelor of fine arts degree and graduate in May. Though he hasn't mentioned any specific post-college plans, when asked during the show's finale if he intended to continue his dancing career, his response was typical of the guy we all knew from before his summer rise to stardom:

"Heck, yeah!"