

# Phil's Incredible Educational Adventure

There's a term used in the world of academia – "stopping out." It refers to students who enroll in a university, earn credits and then, for some reason, stop attending for an indefinite period of time – but with the intention of returning.

Phil Engdahl, originally from Kenosha, Wis., and a graduate of Bradford High School, is one such student who "stopped out." More appropriately, Engdahl "stepped out," leaving UW-Parkside to pursue a career in ballet.

Engdahl became interested in ballet after his sister took him to a performance of the Bolshoi, a premier Russian company. "I saw them do Spartacus," he said, "and I just thought they were glorious. They looked like Greek gods."

Engdahl knew then that he wanted to be a dancer and he began training very seriously, initially in Milwaukee and later in Los Angeles and New York. He had little spurts of work during seven years of training. To help pay the bills he learned to wait tables and drive a cab.

Eventually, the steady dance work came in Los Angeles, Minneapolis, Milwaukee and Chicago. While steady dance work is good for the bank account, it doesn't mean an end to the training.

"There is a vigorous technique class more or less six days a week where a dancer is required, in a professional arena anyways, to take that class," Engdahl said. "If you are at all serious about dance, to stay in shape you take that class almost every day. And how you approach that class is just a matter of desire of how good you want to be and how strong you want to be. It's a great combination of craft and art."



The craft part of the training is the maintenance of a skill level. He compared the maintenance of ballet skills to those of a pianist. "For a great pianist to be able to play profound work, that person has to be well trained and they have to keep on doing it because it just slips away really fast," Engdahl said.

Many dancers choose to go beyond the technique classes. "The weight lifting and swimming are things that a lot of dancers

take on for themselves," Engdahl said. "But in the arena of professionalism, I feel the traditional structure of (the technique class) gives you all of that. It gives you the dynamics of what a ballet dancer must have."

Even though Engdahl's professional ballet career has come to an end, he derives a great deal of satisfaction from dance classes. "It still makes me feel connected to a really big part of my life that I haven't been able to let go of," he said.

Because of his age, 47, the professional opportunities are not what they once were. Much like some professional athletes, professional ballet dancers reach their athletic peak in their mid- to late-30s.

So, for the past five semesters, Engdahl has been back at UW-Parkside. More than 25 years after he stepped out, he stepped back in pursuing a bachelor of arts degree with an art major. And here's something really amazing: Those nine credits Engdahl earned back in 1976 ... they were still there waiting for him!

Engdahl likes the UW-Parkside environment. He has a sculpting studio to work in, materials to work with and the independence to work on his own. He also likes the Art Department faculty. Unfortunately, one member of that department – a person Engdahl described as a mentor and friend – is no longer there. Engdahl said he was hit hard by the untimely death last September of Matthew Bynum.

“Just the notion that Matthew was the kind of person he was and I had the kind of rapport I had with him, I’ll call it street level,” Engdahl said. “But nevertheless, Matthew was an academic. He had been to graduate school and he was very, very talented and he knew how to go through all of those hoops. In a lot of ways, a part of my personality is a little bit of an outsider and he was kind of like something I could hold on to, someone who liked me a lot as a friend and who felt that I had the talent.”

“I think I could have counted on him to steer me through those hoops and say, ‘Phil, you need to do this,’ or ‘I’ll help you do this,’ or ‘Don’t worry about it, I know what to do.’ And that’s not there anymore and I think I’m not feeling as confident in some ways.”

Mentors have been important to Engdahl, who grew up without a father. “I had an older brother who died when I was very young,” Engdahl said. “He was a heroin addict. Neither one of us had a father. So in a lot of ways a mentor has always had an impact for me. Probably more profoundly than someone from, let’s say – it’s not a good word to use but – a more traditional or typical or normal family background. That could be a little bit where somebody like Matthew stands out a lot because I need that sort of thing.”

Along with the direction a mentor can provide, Engdahl thrives on discipline. When it comes to the daily training required to become a sculptor, he relies heavily on his experience as a dancer.

“I started late (in dance) and I had to work very, very hard to get where I was, which I enjoyed,” Engdahl said. “But I think from that experience, from that span of years, I learned that that kind of discipline or dedication does have results. If somebody wants to achieve, that’s an important ingredient. So I have that faith here. I want to have that kind of discipline again in my life with some kind of medium and this is an opportunity to do that.”

“I can come here every day and go to work on sculpture and work independently. I’ve already seen the results of that where you just get better at it and you start making discoveries.”

Engdahl needs 35 more credits to earn his degree. He’s also exploring the possibility of studying sculpture in Florence, Italy. He views it as a win-win situation.



“I’ll be able to go abroad for the first time in my life and have an educational structure, which I think would be pretty ideal,” he said.

Engdahl may be a couple of years away from finishing an educational journey that began in 1976. But then again, his entire life has been an educational journey. Besides learning to be a sculptor, Engdahl continues to teach himself the guitar. “I’ve managed to reach a level where I can entertain myself and it’s just by a fluke that there’s a good guitar here,” he said. “I like to do a riff now and then – it’s a very spiritual release.”

Waiter, cab driver, ballet dancer, sculptor, guitar player ... and there’s more.

“One of the other things that I do along with still taking dance classes and doing art and playing music is ... I play a good game of poker,” he said. “I don’t do it too often, but I’m a disciplined player and I know the game well so I tend to make money doing it. So there’s a

part of me that has a dream of just having that as something that I do on a regular basis; and to be on the circuit a little bit more and possibly even play some tournaments, I enjoy doing it!”

Engdahl usually limits his play to the professional casino environment with structured limits, and very little tournament play.

“In structured play there is structured betting and in tournament play it’s no limit and that’s just a whole different ballgame,” he said. “I put poker at the level chess is at: The knowledge of the game, the knowledge of the players that you’re playing with, the strategies involved and the psychological aspects are all really groovy stuff.”

Just like ballet, sculpting and music – groovy stuff indeed.