

## DANCE STEPPIN' INTO BUSINESS:

Stephen Knight and John Gates build a thriving Wisconsin franchise

### **Dance teachers needed:**

**No experience necessary, includes training, travel, shows and parties.**

**Call to schedule an interview.**

Two gentlemen from different countries seeking summer jobs, see an advertisement in the paper for a dance teacher; one in Chicago, the other in Montreal. Both knowing they had an interest in dance, but not knowing the journey that awaited them. Their love of dance, the glamour, sophistication, energy, and the successful people within the dance scene were all attractive elements that influenced the two in choosing ballroom dance as their career.

Stephen Knight and John Gates taught for Fred Astaire Dance Studios. They enjoyed the dance studio, the Fred Astaire organization, and the chance to have mentors set goals with them and train them to become the teachers they desired. Over 25 years ago, Stephen transferred from Chicago to work for the Wisconsin Fred Astaire franchise owners. He taught at the downtown Milwaukee studio. In 1987, John's first trip on an airplane brought him to Toronto for a dance competition where he met the Milwaukee Fred Astaire teachers and owners. John was asked to move to Milwaukee to teach at the Northshore studio.

Throughout Stephen's years of teaching he loved taking a student from the very beginning; inspiring, encouraging, educating, growing their confidence, and watching as their whole persona would change, physically and mentally. He enjoyed showing off the students he trained by performing in showcases and entering competitions. His best days were when he was a Pro/Am competitor; it was the most fun he could remember. As a dance teacher, John loved the fun social side of being a teacher and competitor; the travel to the many places across the United States, the dance parties, and the various studio activities organized by the Fred Astaire Studios.

Both Stephen and John also competed with professional partners. They enjoyed the challenge and excitement of competition, and especially the invigorating feeling of performing. Dancing professionally was the part of their career that allowed them to focus on developing their own dance skills. John felt the only distress in competitive dancing is the feeling of having "your life scrutinized by a person with a pad in their hands"; having your fate determined by judges. Stephen encourages competitors not to worry about the judges, just dance for the love of dance inside you, enjoy the performance and artistry and don't take the scores too seriously. They were both successful competitors; Stephen won titles in American Rhythm and John won titles in American Smooth. Once they had become acclaimed professional competitors, they realized that although the hours of training and numerous competitions were all worth it, having the titles wasn't as fulfilling as they envisioned. Their titles were the accomplishment of their set dance goals, and they had arrived, but what now? What was their next step?

In 1998 Stephen and John opened a Fred Astaire Dance Studio in Brookfield. Before long their studio became one of the top Fred Astaire studios in the country. They had found a new avenue for their creativity and talent; as business owners. Stephen and John taught their staff how to be the exceptional teachers that they had become. In addition Stephen was the national choreographer for Fred Astaire. They owned half the rights to the Wisconsin and Illinois Fred Astaire franchises, but in 2004 they decided to separate from the other franchise holders and make the Wisconsin Fred Astaire franchise their own. Stephen and John had set even bigger goals and dreams for themselves and for the Wisconsin dance community.

The sky was the limit and they were ready to change the face of Fred Astaire Dance Studios. Stephen and John heightened the level of excellence in studio appearance by opening beautiful facilities. They also improved the quality of instruction and service in all the studios. They want to give customers what they feel they are looking for in a high caliber dance studio. They also provide opportunities for their students to use their dance skills; all the studios hold Friday evening theme parties, group outings to dance clubs, showcase events, awards balls, and competitions on local, regional and national levels. Stephen and John organize 9 to 10 events per year for the Wisconsin Fred Astaire Dance Studios. They have set their competition events' standard very high; they are held at notable venues, they are all well decorated, they hire great judges, they give awards and recognition, and provide three meals a day for participants. Their attention to the details has shown their superiority as franchise owners. In four short years they now oversee seven Fred Astaire Studios in Wisconsin: Brookfield, Madison, Menomonee Falls, Mequon, Milwaukee, Pewaukee, Wales, and opening soon, the eighth studio, Hales Corners.

What happens behind the scenes to create such extraordinary success? Stephen and John enforce a strong business building system with a new philosophy. As a Fred Astaire studio owner or professional teacher under the Wisconsin franchise, Stephen and John feel that the right priorities must be in order; family, financial stability, good credit, and a good business without the thought of championship dancing overshadowing the essentials. After looking back over the years of their experience, they developed a way to teach others to become successful with efficiency. They start their teachers off with a base pay. They offer job security with benefits by providing insurance, paid vacations and holidays, and a retirement plan. The teacher training programs are paid for by the studio. Teachers are tested every six months with costs of exams also covered by the studio. Studio owners want to insure that the teachers are well trained and give quality lessons. Stephen and John encourage all the teachers to excel; they have high expectations and offer direction to each teacher. They make business advancement available to every teacher in the Wisconsin Fred Astaire Dance Studios: once developed into a great teacher, there is opportunity to become a studio manager, and then the option of being a studio owner. If a teacher would like to open a studio, Stephen and John provide the training, help staff the studio, and financially assist the prospective owner. They never have to feel like they are alone; they have a strong support system from Dance Works of Wisconsin, Stephen and John's business entity that owns the rights to the franchise.

In maintaining the momentum in building the studios, the goals for teachers are assessed at 3 years of employment. At that time they construct a business plan to determine if the teacher should choose the competitive dance path with all efforts focused on being a champion dancer or the business path with training to become a studio manager. At 5 years, a professional dance teacher must be well on their way toward a defined position in the Fred Astaire National Company; dance champion or finalist, member of the national dance board, a regional or national choreographer or director, or a studio owner. Stephen and John have established themselves as successful and significant business professionals within the Fred Astaire organization. They show teachers how to market their talents in the dance community and point them in the right direction for a thriving dance career.

The combination of Stephen and John's talents are a match made in heaven. Stephen keeps the creative side flowing as Assistant National Dance Director, traveling coach, and world class judge. John handles the corporate side: all the business decisions, financial decisions, weekly meetings with the studio owners, national company conference calls, event planning, and weekly progress reports. John loves to run the business and watch how the Wisconsin teachers grow into great teachers, managers and studio owners. Their passion for dance and their care for the students and staff of the Wisconsin Fred Astaire Dance Studios can be seen in each of the studios. The studios'

successes are a direct reflection of their hard work. Stephen and John plan to open a total of 12 Wisconsin studios. After they achieve that goal, they will move into taking a position as a stockholder at the FADS home office. “There is nothing that has the benefits, rewards, and enjoyment as the dance business.” From summer job to life long adoration, the dance journey for Stephen Knight and John Gates is infinite.

(All dancers are invited to share in the fun and friendship of dance by attending a Friday night party or one of the Fred Astaire dance events. You can find information by visiting their website: [fredastairewisconsin.com](http://fredastairewisconsin.com))