

Star Treatment



Owner Greg Begley and Chicago store manager Olivia Bromley

With a seasoned dancer at the helm, Motion Unlimited serves the Windy City's thriving dance community.

BY BARBARA DONOHUE

On the eighth floor of a building in Chicago's Loop, Motion Unlimited has shared real estate with some of the country's most prestigious dance companies. Its current neighbors include Ballet Chicago and The Joffrey Ballet; Hubbard Street Dance Chicago once called the building home as well.

The location has been a Chicago dance institution in its own right for more than 60 years. It began as Kling's Theatrical Shoe Company, a manufacturer of dance shoes, founded by Steve and Charlotte Kling. In the 1970s, Charlotte opened the Motion Unlimited store in Evanston, IL, and later moved it to adjoin Kling's factory on the eighth floor at 218 South Wabash Street. "In the back was the manufacturing business," says current owner Greg Begley. "The front, where we are right now, was the retail store. Most of the dancers in the city still refer to it as Kling's, including myself."

Begley bought Motion Unlimited in 1997—the result, at least partially, of being in the right place at the right time. A dancer since age 6, Begley attended college on a dance scholarship and earned a business degree. He moved in 1976 to Chicago, where he danced with Ruth Page at Chicago Ballet and became one of the original members of Hubbard Street Dance Chicago.

One day, after teaching a class at HSDC, which was then on the third floor of 218 South Wabash,

Begley met Steve in the elevator. He asked about Begley's plans and then told him he wanted to sell the store. "I decided that this store would be a good foundation to build on," says Begley. "I teach a lot and I still perform a little bit, yet I'm putting two sons through college."

Kling's Theatrical has since been sold to El Charro, a Mexican dancewear company, and the Klings have retired. But Motion Unlimited continues to cater to professional dancers and amateurs alike, at both the Chicago location and a second store about 30 miles outside the city in Highland Park.

Begley acquired the second shop in 2000. Also

“ Sometimes people need to be reminded that we're here to help. You've got to promote your business, and that's the best way—one on one. ”

—Olivia Bromley

Q & A

A customer weighs in

Judith Svalander is owner, founder and artistic director of Judith Svalander School of Ballet in Crystal Lake, IL. She also heads a performance group which has been the resident dance company at the Woodstock Opera House since 1984, and comprises the school's professional teachers and advanced students. Svalander says she likes to visit Motion Unlimited when she knows owner Greg Begley will be there.

DRN: Have you been a customer of Motion Unlimited for a long time?

JS: Yes, I have.... I'm very satisfied. I get great service from them. They're very personable, and go above and beyond the call of duty.

DRN: Can you describe a time when the Motion Unlimited staff went the extra mile for you?

JS: We were doing *Swan Lake* and we were trying to decide if we were going to be able to get new tutus. It dragged on and on because we were hoping to have them made for each dancer. It didn't work out [but with only a] week left, they were still able to come up with them.

DRN: How do you know Greg Begley?

JS: I knew him from watching him in performances at Hubbard Street. So when I heard he was running a store, I knew that was where I wanted to be, because he would know what he was doing. I was happy to meet him. For me, it was meeting a star. Some people don't realize who's running the business, because he is very humble and would never bring that up himself.

DRN: What about the professional dancers who are customers there?

JS: This is what's very exciting about being in the store. Whenever I'm in the city, I like to stop in. I've been there when someone like Calvin Kitten from The Joffrey was there. When Greg is there, he seems to go very easily from handling a little child who's getting her first [dance] clothing to talking with one of the dancers from one of the companies, very expediently getting what they need, because they always seem to be in a big rush.

DRN: Where is your school located?

JS: About 60 miles [from Motion Unlimited], so it's not like I'm a customer who's right next door. They send things out very rapidly. And they'll come out to the school and do the first pointe-shoe fittings. They're always looking to see what's best for the students. And that, I think, is a huge thing for ballet teachers, because fitting young dancers when they first start pointe is a very precarious thing. How they're fitted is going to [affect] how they dance and how their feet fare.

DRN: What has your overall experience been at Motion Unlimited?

JS: You can tell that [the staff members] really want to help people, especially artists, and they respect the artists at every age level. Greg brings out the best in everyone.

named Motion Unlimited, that store is in the same building as North Shore School of Dance. "There are not a lot of dance stores in the suburbs, so it's a good location for a lot of people," says store manager Jennifer Pettit. She receives stock from the Chicago shop and can special order items.

SERVING THE STARS

Much of the Chicago store's business comes from the professional dance community. "It's fun meeting the dancers and dealing with the wardrobe masters and mistresses," says manager Olivia Bromley. "We don't always see the dancers from the more professional companies, because the wardrobe people will just come and get what they need." Begley says the staff members do their best to accommodate the customers' needs. "They'll come in with a specific design and we will look through catalogs together, or call the manufacturer to see if they could do a little twist to something," he says.

When the dancers do come to the

shop, Begley adds, they usually have very specific requests. "They're looking for particular items because they know that item—the style, the cut, the fit—is exactly what they feel makes them look best," he says. "They're not always open to trying something different." Visits from foreign touring companies, while exciting, tend to be particularly challenging, says Bromley, recalling a time when a large group of Russian dancers came to the shop. It can be difficult, she says, when "no one speaks English and you're trying to figure out what they need."

FAMOUS FIT

Motion Unlimited is known far and wide for pointe-shoe fitting, and many customers come from out of state for the service. Most of the employees have a dance background, says Begley, so they are well suited to helping dancers find the right fit. The staff includes Bromley, who was originally hired by the Klings as a young dancer, as well as four part-timers. "[When] we get a new style of pointe shoes, every-

JUST THE FACTS...

Motion Unlimited

218 South Wabash Street, 8th floor
Chicago, IL 60604
312-922-3330

667 Central Avenue, 2nd floor
Highland Park, IL 60035
847-926-4572

HOURS:

Chicago store: Monday–Thursday, 10 am–6 pm; Friday, 10 am–5:30 pm; Saturday, 9 am–4 pm; open Sundays in September.

Highland Park store: Monday–Thursday, 9 am–5:30 pm; Friday–Saturday, 9 am–4 pm; closed weekends during the summer

SQUARE FOOTAGE: 1,400

MERCHANDISE: Shoes and dancewear for ballet, jazz, tap, liturgical, flamenco, ballroom; also belly-dance wear, children's dancewear, plus-sizes, accessories, ballet music, makeup, jewelry, yoga and exercise wear

NUMBER OF MANUFACTURERS: 30–50

DÉCOR: Colorful, comfortable and professional. The stock is the décor.

BUSIEST SEASON: Fall

BEST-SELLING ITEMS: Leotards, tights, pointe shoes, ballet shoes and ballroom shoes

AVERAGE NUMBER OF CUSTOMERS PER DAY: 10–20

AVERAGE SALE PER CUSTOMER: \$50–150

BIGGEST SURPRISE: Manufacturers selling directly to customers, bypassing the retail stores that were their loyal distributors for years

TOUGHEST CHALLENGE: Customers want things *now*.

GOAL FOR NEXT YEAR: Get a website up and offer costume rental.

STRANGEST CUSTOMER REQUEST: Women's ballroom shoes in men's sizes; adult-size angel costumes



body puts them on," Begley says. "We talk about how they fit, how they look and what kind of foot would do well in this kind of shoe."

The shop offers a discount program for repeat customers. "We have a pointe-shoe card where if you buy five pairs, you get the sixth pair half price," Bromley explains. "Or you can wait until you buy 10 and get the eleventh free." She gives each new pointe-shoe customer a card and calculates the savings.

As pointe shoes became available online and in discount stores, the staff noticed that more shoppers would come for fittings and leave without buying anything. To protect against this practice, the store has had to amend its policy. Now "we charge a fitting fee if they are going to buy somewhere else," Bromley says. "If they try on more than two pairs of shoes and they're not going to buy, they have to pay \$10."

STILL PROMOTING

Though Motion Unlimited has been a mainstay in the Chicago dance community for many years, promotion is still important. "Greg teaches

all over, so he's really good about promoting business through his studios, the teachers, the parents," says Bromley. "He will even take orders for people and bring the merchandise back to them."

Every March, there is a storewide sale, with 20 percent off everything. Bromley says she's also working on setting up a monthly special, with something different every month—all tights on sale or a free item with a minimum purchase, for example. The store also offers discounts to professionals, and at group fittings, dancers receive 10 percent off. Furthermore, schools and dance companies that purchase regularly can participate in a monthly billing program. "We just write up a sales slip and have them sign for it," she says. "Then we bill them in 30 days."

Bromley personally stays in touch with customers. "If I see that someone hasn't ordered in a while, I'll call her and ask if she needs anything," she says. "Sometimes I think people just need to be reminded that we're here to help. You've got to promote your business, and that's the best way—one on one." ▶

Barbara Donohue is a freelance writer based in Acton, MA.