



## A heavenly life of love and dance

By Andrea Viney

*She's a pregnant mother, a dancer, and of late, a Small Business Entrepreneur. You might ask how she does it all, and successfully. Apart from amazing passion and inner strength, one program, appropriately named SCOPE (Securing Career Opportunities and Professional Employment), has given Michelle Heaven the tools to live a perfectly balanced and financially stable life, doing what she loves.*

Imagine being so little that you had to be helped to the bathroom to change in and out of your dance tights and leotard, yet still so bright, that you could understand and perform a choreographed dance. Imagine being just three years old and possessing an artistic gift that would one day become your world. For Michelle Heaven, life moved quickly right from the beginning.

From age 3 to 16, Michelle danced with *Joanna Priest's Studio Arts Centre* in Adelaide every Saturday morning, only pausing briefly at age 14 when her mother (finding dance classes financially difficult) asked if she wanted to continue. Although at this stage, dance was as comfortable to Michelle as a well-worn pair of slippers, at such a young age, it was hard to decide if she wanted this as her career. Dance teacher Joanna Priest was the one who inadvertently paved the path to Michelle's full-time dance career. Joanna wouldn't hear about Michelle leaving, reducing her fees so she could stay. It wasn't long after, while getting ready for class, that Michelle realised a full commitment to dance. 'It was a very clear moment where everything clicked into place ... from then on dance was a really focused part of my life.' At age 16, Michelle moved to Melbourne to study dance at the Victorian College of the Arts, describing it as one of the most challenging times of her life. 'I was a real family person ... living in a large hostel far from home was really difficult ... it took me a long time to find strength in that independence.'

And strength Michelle found – in trumps. Before long she had secured her first *real* job as a professional dancer in Canberra with Sue Healy and from there the accolades followed. Michelle established herself as a successful independent artist, performing and travelling the globe with high profile dance companies such as Chunky Move, Balletlab and Danceworks, as well as choreographing her own work. With her dance career in its prime, Michelle also felt ready to start a family but knew that she didn't want it to coincide with the end of her performing life. So, she became determined to do both. 'Throughout my [first] pregnancy, my passion for dance remained strong and I still felt very much part of the community.' Michelle says she owes this to the wonderful people she worked with for supporting her and being open to these changes in her life and career. 'I was asked to perform despite being pregnant,' she says with much gratitude.

We might wonder how family and a dance career, both of which demand so much attention, could exist harmoniously in a person's life without one settling into the back seat, but for Michelle the 'juggling act' is one of the most rewarding challenges of her life. She says it's all about balance, and of course the wonderful program that has helped her gain new perspective on life and career. SCOPE is a career development program conducted by the Australian Sports Commission's National Coach and Athlete Career and Education Program. Funded by the Australia Council for the Arts, with support from Ausdance, SCOPE has been created to help artists diversify their careers and increase earned income. Michelle Heaven is one of the program's star students. Not only has she maintained a successful performing career and been a mother to her three-year-old son, but Michelle can boast a list of newly acquired skills through short courses (from business writing to self promotion) and now a brand new business venture. Michelle and her partner have entered into the world of small business, selling beautiful wooden walking bikes for small children, two to five years ([www.wooden.net.au](http://www.wooden.net.au)). One might find it fitting, that the concept of these innovative bikes is to inspire children to 'playfully develop vital

balance and motor skills well beyond their years'. It's a brand new challenge and Michelle says she is proud of how far they have come in a short amount of time. Dancers spend their lives demonstrating strong commitment, self-discipline and persistence and through working with a SCOPE career counsellor Michelle has realised 'a whole range of skills that extend far beyond the rehearsal studio'.

When asked why she decided to apply for SCOPE, Michelle is not hesitant to admit that she has experienced fear about what's next. 'Lots of people say to you – what are you going to do when you can't dance anymore? You won't be able to perform after you're thirty – I'd like to prove them wrong!' she says with an air of grace and confidence that has surely been learnt in dance class. Michelle does however admit that the process of ageing brings new challenges for dance artists with such a focus on youthful bodies. When you train for something for the most part of your life, Michelle says 'it's disconcerting to realise you might not be able to financially sustain that career'.

'I thought I needed to start thinking about new options for supporting myself and my family ... to know you're going somewhere and not just sitting waiting for the inevitable ... with SCOPE I have felt supported in making choices and plans towards my future'.

It's always difficult to foresee the future, especially when it comes to the unpredictable, fast-paced nature of the dance industry, but one thing is for certain, with a supportive partner, a growing son, and a child on the way in just a few weeks, Michelle will never be without inspiration and love in her life. 'It will always be important for me and my spirit to stay connected to dance ... but having a family puts life and dance into perfect perspective,' she says.

*SCOPE is a personal and professional development program available to Australian Professional dance artists and choreographers. Contact National SCOPE Consultant **Kay Helliwell** on (03) 9669 2744 or email [scope@ausport.gov.au](mailto:scope@ausport.gov.au) for further information.*