

Joey Dowling and Jacki Ford

DANCEWEAR DESIGNERS

Sisters **Joey Dowling** and **Jacki Ford** know the importance of standing out. The former Radio City Rockettes made their lifelong passion a reality last summer when they launched Jo+Jax—a fashion-forward dancewear line for “those unafraid of color.”

The dream began 10 years ago when the inseparable duo, often mistaken as identical twins, first hit New York City and quickly grew frustrated with their options for audition wear. With Dowling rising to 5’11” and Ford peaking at 5’9,” standard jazz pants fit them like capris. They decided to take matters into their own hands. Careful to select the best fabrics from Manhattan’s Garment District, the sisters would ship materials and sketches home to their mother’s seamstress in Orem, Utah. Their styles became an instant hit with fellow dancers, and soon they had more than 200 custom orders to fill.

But Dowling, now 32, and Ford, 30, agree that the career transition wasn’t easy. “When you’ve been a dancer since age 3, that’s what you identify with. The minute you start thinking about venturing into something different, it’s really scary,” says Dowling, who played Elaine in the 2005 *Sweet Charity* revival and has choreographed for “So You Think You Can Dance.” She says she became overwhelmed with unfamiliar tasks like getting licenses, locating a warehouse and manufacturer and marketing the line. Having zero business experience, the two read books on everything from small business management to pattern making, and scoured the web for e-commerce advice. Their biggest lesson? Don’t let fear overcome you. “Fear is what took us so long to get started. I finally said, ‘I’m just going to do it and if I mess up that’s alright,’” says Ford.

So far, the two have kept their company a family affair. Their brother serves as graphic designer; their father is main investor and business advisor; Jacki’s husband is photographer. It helps that mother Sheryl Dowling garners a lot of attention for the line at her Utah studio, The Dance Club.



Ford (left) and Dowling guest teach and actively audition for commercial work. Dowling is currently associate choreographer for *In the Heights* on Broadway.

The fledgling entrepreneurs say the self-discipline that served them well in the studio enables them to balance multiple tasks so they can still dance. “When you’re a dancer, you’re your own business, you’re the product,” says Ford, a former principal with Rocky Mountain Ballet. “No one’s checking up on you outside of class. When you own your business, it’s the same. You’re the boss, and you have to get things done on your own.”

Their label recently caught the eye of choreographer Mia Michaels during this season’s “So You Think You Can Dance,” when personal friend and Top-20 Finalist, Randi Evans sported several Jo+Jax pieces. And during a West Coast Dance Explosion class, Broadway star Elizabeth Parkinson pulled a student onstage as the example of appropriate dress for auditioning because she noticed her within two seconds. The student was wearing Jo+Jax.

In the meantime, Dowling and Ford are taking cautious steps to further grow their line, releasing five new dancewear pieces and six outerwear looks each summer, along with a few accessories like bags. “We’ve tried to do it as frugally as possible,” says Dowling. “It’s a learning process. We take three steps forward, and then two steps back. We just have to be patient and keep going forward.”

—Courtney Rae Allen