Feet in 2 Worlds
A Nepali-Bhutanese Dancer Navigates Art and Survival in New York City

The life of a struggling artist is already difficult; it can be even harder as an immigrant. How do you keep your dreams in view when you're not even sure where you'll be staying or how you'll support yourself? What will you achieve with your limited opportunities — and your limited time?

Producer Caitlin Whisby brings us the story of a New York artist — a dancer from Bhutan — who is still figuring out her own answers to those questions.

Quincy Surasmith: From Feet in 2 Worlds, this is City of Possibility, a multimedia series that asks: what do immigrants imagine is possible for themselves and their city's future?

I'm Quincy Surasmith, Managing Editor.

New York City has a way of attracting artists to its world-renowned theatres, studios, and streets. "If I can make it there, I'll make it anywhere," the song goes. But even just surviving in New York as an artist — much less "making it" — is famously difficult.

The life of a struggling artist can be even harder as an immigrant. How do you keep your dreams in view when you're not even sure where you'll be staying or how you'll support yourself? What will you achieve with your limited opportunities — and your limited time?

One New York artist — a dancer from Bhutan — is still figuring out her own answer to those questions.

Feet in 2 Worlds producer Caitlin Whisby spent the summer with her, and brings us her story.

Puspa: 1-2-3-4-5, 1-2-3-4-5...

Caitlin Whisby: That's 27-year-old Puspa. She's practicing a new dance move...and it's a little tough.

[Puspa yells]

Caitlin: Puspa's wearing a baggy blue t-shirt, grey sweatpants that she hikes up during practice, and neon colored Nikes that she says she thrifted for thirty dollars.

She's small, and she shuffles her feet back and forth, counting her steps. The room fills with the squeaking soles of others doing the same. They're all part of Puspa's dance crew, Umami Playground.

[Sneakers squeaking]

Caitlin: Today is the first time in a while that Puspa's been able to come here and dance with them. It's a Saturday afternoon. We're in a small studio on the Lower East Side.

There's eight dancers in total, including Puspa. The crew is composed mostly of young Asian women. A dancer from Japan is directing. Another dancer is from Taiwan, and another from South Korea. As you'd expect from dancers, they're lively. And for Puspa, they're the closest thing she has to family in New York.

Puspa: Everyone is fucking beautiful in this company. Like, they're most genuine people I've ever met. They have changed my life.

Caitlin: Puspa hasn't always had friends like the ones she's found in Umami Playground. It took time for her to find a crew like this — one made up of mostly immigrants who also understand what it's like to move to a big city alone.

[Laughter]

Caitlin: When Puspa left Bhutan for New York City two years ago to study dance at a prestigious institution, she thought she had finally reached a place where she belonged.

Today, most of her days aren't spent in a dance school. They're spent serving at a restaurant. You'll hear why in a little bit. First, we'll learn about how Puspa became a dancer.

Her love of dance started back in Bhutan, when she was a child.

Puspa: I think I was maybe like eight or seven. I watched my sister dance in front of me and I used to get so jealous of like how she used to move her hips and her head. I couldn't understand how could someone move like that.

Caitlin: Puspa always wanted to be like her sister. Her sister was the cool girl. And like Puspa does today, her sister danced with a crew.

Puspa: It was called G9. It was like K-pop dance cover group, and then I was in that group. That's how it all started.

Caitlin: Puspa and her friends weren't big on traditional Bhutanese dance styles. The crew looked globally for inspiration. They loved K-pop. They studied dance through YouTube. And a lot of the dancers they idolized were from the United States.

So, Puspa joined G9 with her sister. And years later, she started teaching children at Gokab Dance Studio. The studio is located in Thimphu, Bhutan's capital. While Gokab has gained success, those early years...they were rough.

> Puspa: There was only a few girls and it was a struggle. We couldn't pay rent for the studio. We barely made like 20 dollars in a month, which is crazy.

Caitlin: The group gave dance lessons to kids and put on public performances. But Puspa says people just didn't get it. They considered dancing a hobby, not something you would pay for. And she says her gender made the work even harder.

> Puspa: And yeah, being a woman I was targeted by a lot of men. I was sexually harassed. They always had this misogynistic perspective about women like, "Oh, a woman, she defeated me in a competition. Oh, that's fucking not cool." You know?

Caitlin: Puspa says she also faced negative attention for her ethnic background. She's Nepali-Bhutanese, which is an ethnic minority in Bhutan.

> Puspa: They used to call me a lot of names, like, you know, "dark skin." But I never took that into my heart. I was passionate in my dancing so much, I never fucking cared.

Caitlin: Puspa and Gokab Dance Studio eventually became more established. They branched out and started collaborating with Bhutan's Royal Academy of Performing Arts. And today, both Puspa and Gokab have gained thousands of followers online.

During the pandemic, an opportunity arose for Puspa to finally go overseas. She applied to study modern dance at the Peridance Center in New York City. She was ecstatic to get in on a scholarship, but it covered only 30 percent of the tuition.

Hoping for help, Puspa went to the King's Office in Bhutan to ask for government funding. They said no. During the pandemic, there just wasn't enough money to go around. Puspa was crushed.

That night, she went out with a friend to lift her spirits. The two decided to stop by a popular pub in the heart of Thimphu. To get inside, they climbed a narrow staircase. Halfway up, Puspa ran into someone...

> Puspa: There was this man with a spectacle and a mask, a face mask. He was like, "Oh teach me dancing, teach me dancing." I'm like who — who is that? And I looked closely and I, from — I knew from the eyes. It was the king of Bhutan. King of Bhutan.

Caitlin: The king recognized Puspa right away — he'd seen her dance at public events and on Instagram. Puspa told the King about the dance program in New York. The Queen, who was also there, asked Puspa how much it cost.

> Puspa: I said I got a 30 percent scholarship and the King said, "I think we can cover 70 percent scholarship." Bro, because of the Queen I got a ticket to my dream. It was a divine incident for me. I never believed in God or divine or anything, whatever that was beyond until that moment.

Caitlin: Within weeks, Puspa was on a plane to New York City. Finally arriving in this new city felt surreal.

> Puspa: I opened my window and then I saw bro, it was like a fucking movie. And I couldn't believe that I was in America, like life here is so different, you know? When I look around it's like wow, the people are like walking with their dogs, half-roof cars.

Caitlin: Puspa moved in temporarily with a Bhutanese nurse she'd met on Instagram, before throwing herself into her studies. She took as many as twelve classes a day.

> Puspa: Even my teachers were shocked, like I was that hungry to learn dance.

Caitlin: One of her favorite memories is taking a class in the dance style created by the late American dancer Martha Graham. It's a type of modern dance. Picture dramatic, expressive movements — dancers twist, fall, and contract their bodies, using their breath to propel them through each movement. Dancing in this class stirred something within Puspa.

> Puspa: It felt just you know, like when you find a space when you're really meditating, you're free? I felt that in the moment.

Caitlin: But reality started to seep in. Puspa was only receiving 3,300 U.S. dollars from the Bhutanese government every three months. That's $1,100 a month — which does not go very far in New York City.

> Puspa: My money, myself, my mental health was bad.

Caitlin: Puspa struggled to find housing. She found herself couch surfing and moving across the boroughs.

> Puspa: I was in so many places. I was in Queens, moved to Brooklyn. I was chased out from a house because my rent was due. I was in the middle of the street. I was homeless for like just a few days.

Caitlin: Puspa ended up in some unexpected places. Up until this summer, she found herself living at a Hindu temple in the Lower East Side. She was there for nine months. Now,

she's on her own again and working full time as a server's assistant at an Indian restaurant —

> Puspa: Which sucks. And I'm pretty much working every Monday to Friday. And I'm not able to dance like I used to, you know? And that's a huge grief to that.
>
> I got this deep sadness in my heart the other day while I was working. Like, why am I not dancing like I used to, you know?
>
> It's sad, like, I don't know. It's really sad, I don't know.

Caitlin: The apartment where Puspa is taking the interview has really gorgeous wooden floors, plants everywhere, and eclectic decorations — she's house-sitting for an architect.

But as nice as it is, it's not a permanent solution. Worry is apparent on her face. She says it has all become too much. Living in this new city. Struggling to stay afloat.

This was the kind of financial stress that caused her to drop out of her program at the Peridance Center.

> Puspa: Now when I look back, it's like, it comes to me like, why shouldn't I — why didn't I push myself? But I had to come out of it because my mental health was bad.

Caitlin: Puspa took a break from dancing for a while. It allowed her the time to think about what she really wanted out of life — about what she should prioritize, and how.

Dancing was always the conclusion. And even if her practice was different than the Peridance Center, Puspa knows she doesn't want to give up on her craft forever.

> Puspa: I don't want to do that because this is a — my lifetime practice. This is not like a fast food, like a commercial cloth that you wear and then just take it off next season.

Caitlin: As painful as it's been, Puspa's realized that whatever she does, or where she ends up in life, she'll need to make sure dancing is part of it.

Things are looking up; since starting work at the restaurant, Puspa has finally found time to dance with her crew every Saturday.

Today, they're preparing for a showcase that will feature different dance styles — house, contemporary, and any other style they see fit. In Bhutan, Puspa's dance style mostly drew from hip hop and other forms of street dancing. Being in New York has exposed Puspa to other dance styles.

Her crew, Umami Playground, hopes to perform sometime next year. The studio where they dance is a short walk from the apartment she'll be leaving at the end of

September. The team jokes and helps each other when needed. Their camaraderie shines during their three-hour practice.

[Laughter]

Caleb: Puspa, I think you're too — you're too spread out. Try like, bring it like – so instead of being like —

Dancer: Try this first...

Caleb: Yeah. In, in, in, in. Yes!

Caitlin: Puspa says she doesn't plan on leaving New York anytime soon. The love she's felt from her community here anchors her to the city.

Puspa: Even though I don't have house in New York City, I'm still living at my friend's place and I'm alive. I am a dancer. I have good friends around me. I'm rich in so many ways.

Caitlin: Puspa knows her hopes and dreams might not be easy to achieve, but she's willing to give it her all.

Puspa: From where I am, I made it this far. I'm not quitting. Do you think I'm gonna quit? No.

Caitlin: For Feet in 2 Worlds, I'm Caitlin Whisby in New York City.

Quincy: Today's story was produced for Feet in 2 Worlds by Caitlin Whisby with editing by Quincy Surasmith and Mia Warren. Sound engineering by Hannis Brown. Fact-check by Julie Schwietert Collazo.

This episode is part of City of Possibility, our multimedia series that asks: what do immigrants imagine is possible for themselves and their city's future? You can read more about City of Possibility on our website at Fi2W.org. That's F I the number 2, W, dot org.

Our director is Mia Warren. Our managing editor is Quincy Surasmith. Our development coordinator is Alejandro Salazar Dyer.

Feet in 2 Worlds' original theme music is by Gautam Srikishan.

For more stories of today's immigrants, you can visit our website at Fi2W.org and sign up for our newsletter. You can also find Feet in 2 Worlds on LinkedIn, Instagram, and Bluesky. I'm Quincy Surasmith. Thank you for listening.

Feet in 2 Worlds is supported by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, The Ford Foundation, the Fernandez Pave the Way Foundation, the

Ralph E. Ogden Foundation, the Elizabeth Bond Davis Foundation, an anonymous donor, and contributors to our annual NewsMatch campaign.

CITATION

Whisby, Caitlin. Producer. “A Nepali-Bhutanese Dancer Navigates Art and Survival in New York City,” Feet in 2 Worlds. November 24, 2026.
https://www.fi2w.org/a-nepali-bhutanese-dancer-navigates-art-and-survival-in-new-york-city/

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