

# Dancing with the stars

Former Collin student spends her work days with celebrities

by Heather Darrow

Life is a series of unexpected, wonderful surprises for Diane Perrotta. One minute she is waiting tables in bustling Los Angeles and the next she is stepping onto her hotel balcony to view the pristine, Alaskan mountains. A third minute brings a moose and her two babies into view. The juxtaposition of the wild and the civilized worlds merge into one exhilarating memory. But it is all just a day in the life for Perrotta who finished one job in Alaska and started a new job with Olympians and movie stars.

Perrotta's first job in Los Angeles was as an executive assistant for *Sarah Palin's Alaska*, and today she swaps between working as a story assistant for *Dancing with the Stars* and a story associate producer for *Big Rich Texas*. She spends her days in rehearsal studios with celebrities like Pamela Anderson (model and actress), Joey Fatone (NSYNC), Drew Lachey (98 Degrees), Helio Castroneves (Indy 500 driver), Bristol Palin (activist and reality TV star), Sabrina Bryan (*The Cheetah Girls*), Kirstie Alley (*Cheers*), Gilles Marini (*Sex and the City*), Shawn Johnson (Olympic gold medalist, gymnastics), Kelly Monaco (*General Hospital*), Apolo Anton Ohno (Olympic gold medalist, speed skating), Melissa Rycroft (*Good Morning America* and *Entertainment Tonight* correspondent) and Emmitt Smith (NFL running back and MVP).

Perrotta is one of only four people in the rehearsals, including the star, the professional dancing partner and the field producer.

"It becomes like a dormitory. You spend so much time with the same people in the same space that you get

to know them really well, really fast. I'm grateful for *Dancing with the Stars* because being part of that crew is just so much fun. Everybody is very supportive of each other. It's a dream," Perrotta said.

## Live Log

Every week, Perrotta spends time with a different couple. She has to be constantly aware of potential story ideas to highlight prior to the live performance. She "live logs," which

means she documents everything, including dance moves, technique and positions as well as the times things occur. The notes are sent to the editors, and the detailed description provides an agenda for each tape. She also writes and submits interview questions for the celebrity and pro dancer master interviews each week. On Mondays, the stars perform and voting occurs. On Tuesdays, stars are eliminated. It is Perrotta's job to document live





moments from Monday nights, such as backstage golden moments between celebrities or impromptu hallway rehearsing, for video packages that will be shown on Tuesday's results show.

"It's very much a family environment and second home at the studio. One of our pro dancers was generous and arranged for a food truck to come by the rehearsal hall for lunch one day. The cast and crew got to have as much as we wanted, and we all took a break from rehearsing and ate together outside. Another time, a celebrity from season 13 surprised everyone with an enormous ice cream sundae station, complete with all the fixin's. One celebrity from season 14 would pop in to various couple's studios and greet them with a, 'Hi family.' It's so nice to see strangers become close on this show," Perrotta said.

### A Theatrical Beginning

Surprisingly, everything this Allen High School graduate learned in television she says stems from working in her high school news station KGLE 3 and also her live theater experience.

"I got my start here at Collin College. I chose Collin because the theater department has a very good reputation and great professors. Like any play or musical, you have rehearsals every day and then the live performance. *Dancing with the Stars* is very similar: we have rehearsals, and then the live show."

At Collin College, Perrotta was the costume builder for "How I Learned to Drive" and the dresser and costume builder for "Don't Rock the Jukebox." She took radio and TV, film, theatrical makeup and worked in the college's costume shop after school hours.

"At Collin, I learned how a show goes from a table read to closing night and everything in between. Learning that process was very educational and useful."

After Collin, Perrotta worked at many Dallas area professional theaters, transitioning from costumer, assistant stage manager and stage manager. She moved to California because L.A. is



known as the entertainment capital of the world, so it just "made sense" to jump in the middle of it.

Though her life has been a whirlwind of marvelous surprises, behind the scenes she has worked very hard every step of the way.

"When I work long, late hours that seem endless, sometimes I think, 'This feels so overwhelming. I never sleep or see my family or friends.' But, you have to remember that it's only for a moment in time. When the dust settles and you've completed something, you think of why you do this in the first place. I love showbiz, so I keep going back to it."

Perrotta's heart has always been behind the scenes with production. She says she has a profound appreciation and respect for actors and dancers from watching how hard they work, working along with them and seeing the things that can go unnoticed. While her coworker celebrities become increasingly more famous as time goes by, Perrotta cheers them on from behind the camera and silently cherishes personal achievements of her own, like the fact that she was

recently accepted into the Producers Guild of America.

"I owe a lot to what I was taught at Collin College because I used those skills to help me break in to the Dallas professional theatre world. The work experience in Dallas theatre contributed to the skills I needed to get my start in TV production. Having a producer title is one of my greatest achievements because that's what I set out to do. Now, I have the opportunity to work with other producers from different realms of entertainment who mentor me along the way."

The amazing job experiences are still a bit surreal for Perrotta who reflects back on the last few years of her life with a big sense of gratitude.

"It's one thing to see something you worked on come to life on the stage or on screen, but it's a big feeling of accomplishment when you're the one helping all the pieces come together."

You may visit [Collin.edu](http://Collin.edu) for more information about classes at Collin College. ❖

*Heather Darrow is a public information writer for Collin College.*