

Young Chassid steps into dance world

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It's an incongruous sight: showrooms full of tutus, toe shoes and tights, and an office with Chumashim on the shelf and a portrait of a rabbi from yesteryear on the wall.

A husky young man sits behind the desk, with *payes* and a black coat. He's smiling because he has found fulfillment in the world of dance accessories, a seemingly strange vocation for a Chassid.

Moshe Lobl, 25, a member of the Belz community, is the owner of Johnny Brown, a Montreal business dating back to 1932, which has supplied dance and theatre companies for decades.

With no background in business, let alone ballet and tap, Lobl bought what had become a struggling enterprise 1½ years ago. In that time, he says he has tripled sales and aims to be the "partner" of every dance company and school in Canada.

He owes his rapid success in large part to two very different sources: Agence Ometz's ProMontreal Entrepreneurs (PME) program and the rabbi whose portrait is hanging on the wall.

Lobl has become a poster boy for the agency's goal of helping young Jewish people stay in Montreal and grow their businesses. PME believed in Lobl's vision, as unlikely as it appeared, and extended him \$50,000 in startup capital, the maximum available from a fund started by Stephen Bronfman and Jimmy Alexander 17 years ago.

More important than the money, says Lobl, is the support PME has given him and continues to provide. That has included advice on starting a business, helping him find additional seed money from government sources and allowing him to attend PME's ABCs of Business workshops – all free of charge.

PME manager Katherine Korakakis says Lobl took everything offered to him and has been one of her most avid clients.

The biggest boost, Lobl says, has come from the mentor, an employer of more than 1,500, who he was matched with. "I can call him any second of the day," he says. "I can ask any question and not feel stupid."

His spiritual mentor on the wall is Rabbi Yeshaya Steiner (1851-1925), founder of the Kerestirer Chassidic dynasty. He was revered for his charitable work helping needy Jews and non-Jews alike, says Lobl.

A native of Brooklyn, Lobl moved to Montreal six years ago, when he married a local woman. He fundraised for the Belz schools, which was a well-paying job, but after five years, he started feeling restless.

"I'm not your average Chassid. I'm a go-getter. I interact well with people. I wanted to achieve something, to help more people," he says. "But I didn't know what to do."

He travelled to Budapest to visit the grave of Rabbi Yeshaya Karelitz, hoping for inspiration.

In the cemetery, a stranger from New York began talking to him and advised him that, after five years of community work, it was time he struck out on his own.

Immediately upon his return, Lobl handed in his resignation. "I had no idea where I was going, but I had faith," he says. "The very same day, I ran into a real estate agent who told me he had sold a building on Hutchison Street, and that there was a business for sale in it" – Johnny Brown.

An accountant advised him that it was not profitable, but if he was looking for a challenge, that he should go for it. The current owner had bought it in 1980 from the real Johnny Brown, whom Lobl had never heard of.

"I felt I had received a sign and purchased it," he says. It was a gamble for the father of three, to say the least.

In November, he moved the business to St-Laurent and has added a warehouse to keep up with demand. He employs 16 people full time, almost all of whom are new hires.

Lobl has moved sales almost completely online. His model is to create a package of supplies customized to the needs of each dance organization or school. He now has customers from across the country.

The warehouse has become something of a shrine to the real Johnny Brown, who Lobl has come to deeply respect, with photos of him and an exhibit of his old shoemaking tools.

Brown was a Jewish dancer from England who opened a studio in Montreal. During the Great Depression, ballet slippers were hard to come by in Canada, so Brown started bringing them in from New York. Seeing the demand, he stopped teaching, opened a store and starting manufacturing pointe shoes.



Moshe Lobl

Eventually, he expanded into the whole panoply of the stage.

Lobl's advice to young entrepreneurs is not to follow their passion, but to seize an opportunity and make it their passion, as he has done. He also says that they should be prepared to "hustle": he puts in 80 to 100 hours a week, which, of course, excludes Shabbat.

It's a field that immerses him in a non-Jewish world, one that is predominantly female. But, he says, he does not feel uncomfortable at all. Most of his staff are women.

Lobl never went to college and he is not impressed with formal education alone. "If people come to me talking about how many degrees they have, I tell them we have no place. I'm looking for people who want to learn, who want to make a better world," he says.

It's not only about making money, Lobl insists, he also feels it is his mission to promote dance as a wholesome, affordable activity. He's enrolled the two eldest of his three daughters in ballet lessons and is encouraging others in the chassidic community to do the same.

His line of business has not raised eyebrows in his community, as far as he can tell. But, he says, "People do stop me and ask 'how did you do it?'"

The PME fund selects recipients twice a year. More information can be found at promontrealentrepreneurs.org. ■



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