



teacher told her that she had real potential to be something great, so she entered a twirling contest.

"I won a trophy, and was totally hooked after that. It just kind of blossomed from there", she said.

Zalud continued to take lessons from her until she graduated.

After she graduated, "I was kind of stuck without a coach", she said. "But luckily there is a studio in Omaha called Sues Stepper-ettes where I started working with a new coach."

Sues Stepper-ettes was formed in 1973 and is the largest baton twirling and pom pom studio in the Midwest. The company is home to multiple national championship teams.

"I started training there when I was 12 and I have been taking private lessons there pretty much through college", Zalud said.

Every single weekend Zalud and her family would make the trip to Omaha so she could have her lessons.

"In the summer months I would normally stay with my aunt who lives in Omaha for a few weeks so I could be closer to my coach", she said.

Zalud was so dedicated to the sport that in the summer months she would travel across the country to participate in camps and competitions in Ohio, Pennsylvania, Colorado, Georgia and Texas.

"Summers for me growing up revolved around baton because that is when nationals is. You get ready the whole summer and then come the end of July you are ready to compete", Zalud said.

Zalud went on to twirling in college at USD where she is majoring in medical biology with an emphasis in interdisciplinary sciences.

"Once I found out I could twirl at USD and I found out I got the Presidential Alumni Scholarship it was kind of a set deal", she said. "I loved it ever since."

Besides the USD scholarship, Zalud has also received many other scholarships including the Miss America Top Academic Scholarship, South Dakota Opportunity Scholarship, the Evelyn Maul Jones Scholarship and the Healthcare Education Scholarship - just to name a few.

At USD she also is a member of Colleges Against Cancer, Dakotathon/Dance Marathon, Kappa Alpha Theta Sorority and is a clarinetist in the Coyote Pep band.

With all the extracurricular activities, it is hard to believe this young college student also owns her own business. Zalud is the



owner and instructor of the Dakota Diamonds Twirling Group where she provides baton instruction to young girls residing in local communities including Vermillion, Elk Point and Dakota Valley. Currently, 16 students from ages 4 to 10 participate in the group.

"I do love encouraging twirling in the younger generation", she said.

Zalud said that twirling used to be huge in South Dakota but the sport has sort of died on the vine.

"In the midwest I think that there are fewer twirlers", she said. "Its largely in the east-coast and west-coast."

Zalud loves to teach to area youth because the sport has made her who she is today.

"For me it did so much. I think that it truly made me outgoing, I also got to network with others and have more confidence and self-concept. I love to see my students grow."

One of her favorite quotes that she tells her students is "Don't let anyone dull your sparkle."

"That is something that I truly hope for them", she said. "They are all so beautiful and have so much potential. Each have so much to offer, and they each have different strengths and capabilities. It is up to them to discover it and cultivate it. That is my dream for them."

Zalud said that she hopes that no one ever crushes her students' dreams. She said that when she was in middle school none of her peers really understood her dream of twirling.

"They couldn't understand the time I put into and the mastery that it really takes. It is an incredibly difficult sport", she said. "It takes a lot of practice to cultivate those kinds of abilities. I don't think that any of them could really relate to what I was doing. Many people said it wasn't even a sport. It was really discouraging. But I had my friends, my family, my coach and most importantly, I had my dreams. So what they said didn't matter." Zalud hopes that she can inspire students to continue twirling in the area.

■ By Jordynne Hart

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