



"For dancers, there's such a small window of opportunity to do this, and I came into this success at a much later age," says Vera Rowe, dancing here with her partner, Uriel Garcia. Her website, which includes photos and videos, is at [www.uvlatindance.com](http://www.uvlatindance.com).

# Gotta Dance

How one alum went from high school teacher to Latin dance champion

AS A 12TH-GRADE CALCULUS TEACHER, Vera Rowe covered derivatives and integrals in her lessons. And while she loved her job at Boston Arts Academy, she dreamed of dancing.

So she put her "sensible" career on hold to pursue her true calling. It was a good move. Rowe (SED'04) is now a world Latin dance champion.

Though Rowe took an unlikely path to the top of the professional Latin dance world—"I'm competing against girls who are 18, 19, 20 years old, and I'm about to be 35"—she has always excelled on the dance floor. She majored in dance at New York's famed Fiorello H. LaGuardia High School of Music & Art and Performing Arts and continued to dance for fun while competing for the varsity gymnastics team (and maintaining her spot on the dean's list) at Penn State.

During grad school at BU and throughout her teaching career, Rowe immersed herself in Latin dance, performing Cuban-infused salsa and bachata, a cousin of salsa with roots in the Dominican Republic. She took classes, joined a dance team, gave lessons, and eventually opened her own school. Buoyed by the competitive nature that made her a Division I gymnast, she found a partner and started entering contests—all while teaching by day.

The transition to full-time dancer was hardly seamless. Rowe and her partner trained and competed for two years, and while her focus was steely, her partner's priorities were shifting. She began the difficult search for a new partner.

"I needed someone who would clear everything else they had going on and go into the studio with me full time," Rowe says. "If I couldn't do it 110 percent, I didn't want to do it at all." Just as she began to consider retiring, she found Uriel Garcia, who was as eager as she was to dedicate his life to dancing. They began practicing eight hours a day, every day. The work paid off almost immediately.

In 2013, they won the world title in salsa cabaret at the World Salsa Summit, and their career took off. They defended

RICARDO TELLEZ PHOTOGRAPHY



and won their title for the next two years, and swept events from Philadelphia to San Francisco and Hong Kong to Madrid. In 2013 and 2014, they won the International World Salsa Open in Miami and in 2014, they took the salsa and bachata titles at the Montreal Salsa Convention.

The highlight was winning the 2014 invitation-only World Bachata Masters in Madrid—a big upset, Rowe says. "It was the first time an American couple had ever won."

Rowe believes their athleticism sets them apart. Garcia is a former football

and basketball player; Rowe has a gymnast's fearlessness and, at five-foot-one, an ideal frame for the aerial flourishes that have become their trademark. They are in demand for paid gigs on the international Latin dance circuit; when they are not competing, they teach master classes and perform exhibitions at events around the world. They travel nearly every weekend, year-round, at an exhausting pace—not that Rowe is complaining.

"It's a dream come true for me," Rowe says. "In my heart, the only thing I ever wanted to do was dance." **RYAN JONES**