**Sisters dance their way into Joffrey's 'Nutcracker'**

By John K. Ryan

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Jessica and Alena Pedroza come from a very caring, loving family.

The sisters spend time with their parents, Suzanne and Severo, who take them to games for their local softball teams, travel with them on long vacations and have fun romping with the girls and their dogs, A.J. and Scruffy, at their Orland Park home.

For much of the week, though, the two young girls are part of another "family."

This second family watches over them during their many hours rehearsing to be part of the Joffrey Ballet's production of "The Nutcracker," which opens Friday at the Auditorium Theater, 50 E. Congress Parkway in Chicago.

Jessica, 14, playing both a clown and a mouse, will be in her third production of the holiday classic. Alena, 9, playing a snow tree angel, will be making her Nutcracker debut.

"Everyone in the show is connected," Jessica explained. "It's like a 'big sister/little sister' or 'big brother/little sister' feeling with older dancers watching our backs. It makes you feel calm while you're on stage."

Alena feels similarly about having her real-life older sister around for support.

"It feels better, but I've seen it so many times I feel comfortable," she said.

Dancing's not exactly new for either girl. Both got started when they were 3 years old at The Dance Workshop in Orland Park.
Suzanne Pedroza said she started Jessica there 11 years ago to keep her active and for socialization.

"She was alone back then," Suzanne said.

Jessica - who spends downtime enjoying Fred Astaire, Gene Kelly and Kathryn Grayson dancing in films on Turner Classic Movies - said she’s loved every minute of her own dancing days.

"Dancing is a way of life," she said. "There’s never a day I’m not involved. Every time I accomplish a new step, I feel I amounted to something more than when I walked in."

Alena looks forward to going to rehearsals just as much.

"I get upset if I can’t go," Alena said. "The teachers are so good. One of the man teachers makes a lot of jokes when he dances."

Their parents believe the girls have gained more than just learning dance steps from being involved with the Joffrey Ballet.

"It’s a commitment, but it’s worth it," said Suzanne, who volunteers as a backstage coordinator during the production. "The poise and composure they learn and the experience of going through auditions is priceless. It’s opened their eyes that they can do anything in life. They know it’s attainable."

Severo Pedroza said the girls also have learned a work ethic that has helped them be topnotch students at Cardinal Joseph Bernardin Catholic School in Orland Hills.

Still, he stressed the importance of involving his daughters in pastimes other than dance.

He mentioned softball, school plays and even rock climbing as other activities in which they participate.

"I told them if I lost some weight, we’d go rock climbing at Life Time Fitness," Severo said. "They held me to it."

"We expose them to different things. We tell them they can dance as long as they want to do it."

It appears they’re going to want to do it for quite some time.

Both girls mention dance as a possible career. Jessica, an eighth-grader, said she’s leaving her options open, while third-grader Alena is back and forth between being a professional dancer or softball player.

In the meantime, they’re excited about friends coming to see them in "The Nutcracker" running from Friday through Dec. 26.

"A lot of girls (from school) plan on coming," Jessica said. "Some came to see it last year and are telling the others how great it is."

Light show shines next weekend

If you’re looking to load the family in the car and start cruising neighborhoods in Orland Park to check out houses decorated for Christmas, think about doing so next weekend.

That’s probably the best time to do so because homes are being judged starting Friday in the village’s third annual Christmas House Decorating Contest.