**'This has been a wild ride'**

**Lohmann: A year ago, Richmonder and Irish dancer Morgan Bullock posted a video on TikTok. Now she's a global star.**

**BY BILL LOHMANN**

The Irish prime minister invited her to Ireland for the March 2021 St. Patrick's Day Festival; Riverdance, the theatrical show of traditional Irish music and dance, asked her to perform with the show's U.S. tour when it comes to Virginia; and Beyonce's mother shared the video online.

The funny thing is, Morgan Bullock very nearly didn't even post the video on TikTok and Instagram.

At that point last May, we were six weeks into the pandemic, and Bullock was "just kind of bored," she recalled with a laugh when asked what prompted her to make public the video of her performing an Irish dance to a remix of rapper Megan Thee Stallion's song "Savage," featuring Beyoncé.

"I'd taken some time off from dance, and it was nice outside," Bullock recalled of the recording she made at Dogwood Dell. "I honestly almost didn't post it because I didn't like it. I didn't think I looked good. But I sent it to my mom, and she said it's pretty good and you should post it. So I did."

She posted it on May 2, 2020 - and then everything broke loose.

The <a href="https://www.tiktok.com/@yourangleyuordevil/video/6822377929968766213?lang=en&amp;is\_copy\_url=1&amp;is\_from\_webapp=v1" target="\_blank">video was little more than 12 seconds</a>, but it caught fire in the world of social media. It's undeniably eye-catching; to date, it has more than 1.3 million views, though that doesn't include shares from other social media sites, and Bullock has gained thousands and thousands of more views with subsequent dance videos. The fans might have been flamed a bit by so many people having more spare time because of the pandemic.

There were critics - there always are - who apparently felt she had committed some sort of cultural sin: a young Black woman performing Irish dance with a soundtrack of hip-hop music. Some of the comments were nasty and racist. However, far more people came to her defense, enthralled, perhaps, by the unexpected spectacle of someone who didn't fit the stereotype of "Irish" performing with such skill and joy and a cool, no-big-deal demeanor. And the support came from high places.

The Irish prime minister invited her to Ireland for the March 2021 St. Patrick's Day Festival (though she was unable to travel because of COVID-19 and instead participated virtually in a St. Patrick's celebration organized by the Irish Embassy); Riverdance, the theatrical show of traditional Irish music and dance, asked her to perform with the show's U.S. tour when it comes to Virginia; and Beyoncé's mother shared the video online.

As it was all unfolding, Bullock, 21, who grew up in Midlothian and is a student at Virginia Commonwealth University, couldn't help but wonder: <em>What just happened</em>?

She still feels that way, as the year of worldwide acclaim continues beyond anything she could have imagined: new fans, more offers, global press attention.

"It's crazy that it's been this long," she said. "For me, it's still like, 'Wow! People still are interested.'"

"Honestly, it's just been very surreal and unexpected. For me, I've been Irish dancing for over half my life, so I didn't really think much of it when I posted the video originally," Bullock said. "I know I don't look like the typical Irish dancer so that's always there, but not something I've had to constantly think about."

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<strong>Yolanda Bullock</strong>, Morgan's mother, laughed when I asked if her reaction was "What?!" when she realized years ago that her daughter's dance focus would not be jazz or tap or ballet or hip-hop but Irish dance.

"It wasn't 'What?!' It was like <em>'Wwwwuuuutttt?!</em>'" Yolanda said, drawing out the word into a contorted, incredulous exclamation. <em>"Are you serious</em>?"

In fact, she remembers the precise moment when Irish dance came into her daughter's life. It was at a dress rehearsal for the annual recital of the Jessica Morgan School of Dance, where Morgan, then not quite 10, had been dancing since she was 3. Morgan was sitting on a row with her dance classmates, watching the rehearsal. Yolanda was sitting in the row behind them, filling the role of "one of the dance moms making sure they didn't make too much noise."

The portion of the show arrived when the school's Irish dance teacher performed a solo. Irish dance is characterized by a mesmerizing combination of a rigid upper body with rapid leg and quick, precise foot movements that can include clicking, stamping and tapping.

"Morgan looked up, and she stopped talking to her friends - I remember this - and I noticed she was paying attention," Yolanda said. "She literally turned around and said, 'I want to do it.' I said, 'Do what?' She said, 'I want to do <em>that</em>.' It was like something reached out and grabbed her."

After the recital, "I heard about it constantly," Yolanda said, so they talked to one of Morgan's teachers, who encouraged her to try Irish dance.

"She said the way [Morgan] moves naturally she might be really good at it," Yolanda recalled. "It turns out she was really good at it. Like really, <em>really</em> good at it."

Other dance classes were dropped and Irish dance became the pursuit, which led to competitions and special outfits and, well, "It was crazy," said Yolanda, who earlier this year began a new job as an accountant for the city of Petersburg after a decade working in the finance department of Richmond Public Schools.

"I didn't know what I was getting myself into, but it's been great for Morgan - even before <em>this</em> - and it's been great for me. I've met the best people," she said. "My close friends are Irish dance moms whose kids don't dance anymore. They're saved on my phone as 'My Village People.' We're still very close."

As Morgan immersed herself in Irish dance, a regular highlight was the monthly arrival of Irish Dancing Magazine, which her parents had given her as a gift. For years, she was always arriving home from school and asking her dad - Ray Bullock Sr. works from home as commissioner of the Mid-South Basketball Officials Association - if her magazine had come.

Last August when the magazine arrived in their mailbox, Morgan was on the <em>cover</em>.

"He said he almost teared up seeing that, thinking about when Morgan was little and she used to look for this magazine and just treasure it," Yolanda said, "and now she's on the cover."

Seeing the youngest of their three children on ABC's "Good Morning America," reading stories about her from the BBC and other international news organizations, watching her blossom into a celebrity - with something to say - has been "unreal," Yolanda said.

"We were just living our lives," she said, "and all this happened."

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<strong>Dance isn't all</strong> there is for Morgan, who attended James River High and is currently studying elementary education at Virginia Commonwealth University. She is in the last undergraduate year and has another year of master's work. She also works full time at a child care center.

None of that could have prepared her for how to deal with being thrust into the world spotlight - or maybe all of it did. She has responded - particularly to the backlash - with grace, patience and a maturity beyond her years, in the manner of a seasoned performer and a teacher at heart. She has come to view the whole affair as an opportunity, in more ways than one.

Morgan was taken aback by those who criticized her for "cultural appropriation," which means taking or using elements of a culture that is not your own without understanding or respecting the culture. Understanding and respecting Irish dance is exactly what she had been doing since she was 10 years old. She had immersed herself in Irish dance, read and learned about it, and shared it with others through her performances.

She has never encountered any problems within the Irish dance community because of who she is. She has qualified for Irish dance world championships a half-dozen times and performed in the United Kingdom on a number of occasions. In the 2018 world championships, she came in 43rd, a Top 50 finish being quite an achievement on the world stage. When she visits Ireland, she stays with the family of an American friend.

"Morgan has Irish cousins as far as she's concerned," Yolanda Bullock said.

Morgan flipped the "cultural appropriation" argument into what she believes she's been doing all along: "cultural appreciation."

"I had to step back and [realize] these people don't know me, and I know that I'm not doing anything wrong so I don't have to get defensive," she said.

She recognized that even her social media replies were shared many thousands of times, so she suddenly had a platform to compare and contrast "appropriation" and "appreciation" and to further introduce Irish dance to a new audience.

"To put it in perspective, you wouldn't tell a girl from England that she couldn't do ballet because she's not French," Morgan said. "It's a dance form, it's a cultural art, and it was created to be shared."

Generally, though, the response has been "overwhelmingly positive" - and even better than that, she says, when people say things like, "You're making Irish dance cool."

Jessie Baffa, owner of the Baffa Academy of Irish Dance in Midlothian, where Morgan is a student, said the attention Morgan has faced wouldn't be easy for anyone, let alone a young woman unaccustomed to that sort of spotlight.

Yet, she has "handled everything with humbleness, class and grace.

"Morgan also has inspired many people around the world to Irish dance and has definitely helped spread Irish culture," Baffa said. "She is a beautiful girl inside and out, a fantastic dancer and teacher, and I'm so happy to see her succeeding."

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<strong>The last year</strong> has changed Morgan's view of what the future might hold.

"If you would have asked me a year ago, I probably would have said I wanted to be a second-grade teacher and maybe teach dance on the side," she said. "Now, I don't even know."

Irish dance generally does not offer much in the way of professional opportunities for most people, Morgan said. Dancers compete on an amateur level "until you can't walk anymore," she said, and then have limited options other than touring with a show or teaching.

"But now," she added with a laugh, "there's also TikTok videos."

The sprawling reach of social media, as well as her talent and story, have made Morgan Bullock a recognizable face and her dancing a money-maker. She envisions opportunities to tour with a show, advertising and virtual lessons. She recently traveled to New York to participate in a documentary about the global story of Irish dancing. Riverdance is expecting her next year. In an email, a Riverdance spokesperson confirmed the invitation to Morgan and said "dates are currently being rescheduled and an alternative arrangement will be made."

The spokesperson added a comment from Padraic Moyles, association director and brand manager of Riverdance and its former principal dancer: "Morgan embodies the kind of values promoted by Riverdance. She's an incredible talent, and even beyond dancing she's shown such poise and courage."

As Morgan said, "It's so crazy how many opportunities have come from that TikTok video."

And it never would have happened if Yolanda Bullock hadn't followed that most parental of instincts and encouraged her daughter to post the video on TikTok despite Morgan's doubts.

"She's a perfectionist," Yolanda said. "She's the most humble person I've ever seen. She doesn't realize how good she is. I'm a critic, but not as hard as she is, though. I thought [the video] was cute. I didn't even know what TikTok was."

So Yolanda suggested that posting the video would be "a good thing."

"But I had no earthly idea," she said with a laugh, "that people would be so engaged and so curious as to what my kid's been doing for the last 10 years. I thought it was going to be a good thing, and it turned out to be a fantastic, amazing, shocking, jaw-dropping thing.

"This has been a wild ride."