

# DanceTeacher®



ALEXIS PAYTON. COURTESY MSG.

## Radio City Rockette Alexis Payton Has a Master's Degree in Environmental Engineering



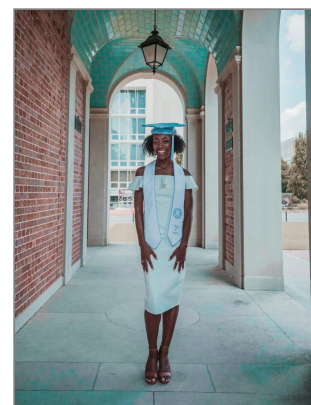
BY HALEY HILTON

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Becoming a Radio City Rockette is the kind of dream most dancers have to zero in on with laser focus. It's so **X** that it can almost feel like showing interest in anything else will make it slip through your fingers. But for Alexis Payton, that's just not true. Not only has she spent two years with the famous troupe, but she has a master's degree in environmental engineering and works as a data analyst on the side. Whether you're talking about her STEM work or her high kicks, it appears the sky's the limit for Payton.

Payton was born in Raleigh, North Carolina, and began dancing when she was 3 years old at a local studio called Carolina Dance Center, where she trained until she graduated from high school. While a student at Ligon GT Magnet Middle School, she joined Tapestry, her school's tap company, which was directed by Freddie Lee Heath. The group was modeled after the Radio City Rockettes, and it was the first time Payton ever considered the possibility of a professional dance career. "I thought I would become a doctor," she says. But that dance program eventually led to her attending the Rockettes Summer Intensive, which opened her eyes to other possibilities. "It made me realize that dance was more than a hobby for me," she says. But she wasn't ready to give up her STEM aspirations, either.

In an effort to keep the doors of both of her dreams open, Payton attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill for college, where she studied environmental health science with a minor in computational biology. The school did not have a dance major or program, but Payton was able to join a street-style dance team associated with the school called Kamikazi. She also continued taking classes at Carolina Dance Center. "It was exactly what I needed at the time," she says. She graduated in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic and decided that, rather than audition for dance companies right away, she would take one more year to earn her master's degree in environmental engineering. "I realized I didn't actually want to be a doctor," Payton says. "But I fell in love with public health, and knew it was the career I wanted to do once I finished my professional dance career."



COURTESY PAYTON.

After completing her master's degree in June 2021, Payton made the move to New York City and auditioned for the Radio City Rockettes. That August she got a call letting her know she had booked the job. "I was so over the moon when I got the phone call, I can't remember anything they said," Payton says. She's danced with the company ever since. "I've loved it," she says. But she's not on a total science hiatus: She's maintained a part-time position as a data analyst at UNC Chapel Hill in an effort to keep her foot in the door.

When she's off-season from the Rockettes, Payton does freelance dance work. Through the end of this month, she is performing in *The Queen's Ball: A Bridgerton Experience*, an interactive show in which audiences attend as guests at a ball and watch a love story unfold in front of them.

Payton shares her goals for the future, her advice for educators in 2023, and what she's currently working on artistically.



COURTESY PAYTON.

**On her goals for the future:** “I would love to perform at an awards show, like the Tonys or the VMAs, dance for a recording artist, do Broadway, and do more TV and film. Beyond that list of jobs, my goal as an artist is to constantly push myself to be uncomfortable, to try new styles, and to become as versatile as possible. It’s easy to label ourselves as jazz dancers or tap dancers or ballet dancers, but I want to encourage myself to go for anything that makes me genuinely happy.”

**Advice for teachers in 2023:** “Sometimes your student may need to look outside of your studio for what they need to grow. I think it’s helpful for studio owners to accept that as a part of life, and trust that everything will be okay. My studio owners growing up told me about dancers who had left and come back for various reasons, and

there was never a sense of animosity there. They just want to see everyone happy, and I think that’s admirable.”

**On her most influential teacher:** “I want to highlight my middle school tap teacher, Freddie Lee Heath. Not only did he introduce me to the style of the Rockettes, but he encouraged all of his students to be good people. He gave us a nurturing environment where we could be pushed. He also gave us the chance to choreograph on each other, and finding my choreographic voice at such a young age has really served me as I’ve gotten older.”

**What she’s currently working on as an artist:** “I’m learning that how you treat a job should be different from how you treat class. There should be a difference in how you occupy the space when you are paying versus when you are being paid. I love being a Rockette and doing precision work, but I also think it’s okay to make mistakes, and class is a good time to explore that and have fun. It’s a good time to discover new things about yourself as a dancer, but you need to give yourself permission to do that.”