

‘Dancing with the Stars’ shows the person behind the celebrity

By **SOPHIE MURRAY**
Arts & Life Editor

Get your dancing shoes ready, it’s another season of “Dancing with the Stars.”

The show is known for the sparkly costumes, impressive choreography and dramatic eliminations, but there is another strong factor that keeps people coming back: the show makes celebrities feel human.

I love tuning in and seeing my favorite celebrities take on something completely new and show a vulnerable side of themselves that audiences really never see.

I grew up watching celebrity chef Giada De Laurentiis on the Cooking Channel with my mom. My favorite movie is “10 Things I Hate About You,” so seeing actress Julia Stiles on the show was so exciting. Watching figure skater Amber Glenn, who is known for her phenomenal figure skating skills, watching them all compete in something completely new for them and be real and honest about the difficulty of the experience is so amazing to watch.

It is so valuable to have an outlet where we can see celebrities as normal people.

Celebrities are presented to us as people who have everything figured out. They walk red carpets in perfectly styled outfits with their best faces on, star in movies and TV shows and post carefully curated versions of themselves.

It’s easy to forget that behind all of this is a person who, just like us, can feel nervous, embarrassed, frustrated and unsure of themselves. Especially when they are going through something as vulnerable as dancing on one of the most watched live television shows,

most of the time with no prior experience. Watching the first two nights of the season has made me much more appreciative of what “Dancing with the Stars” actually gives an audience.

As someone who has been dancing for 17 years and still actively dances, I could easily watch the show and judge the celebrities harshly. While judging is obviously part of the competition, especially from viewer votes at home, I have found myself paying much more attention to everything that happens before and after the dance: the nerves, the tears, the excitement and the pride.

Known for “Summer House” and “Love Island,” TV personality Ciara Miller paired with pro Brandon Armstrong and gave viewers a glimpse into a side of herself that they may not normally see. Before her performance, Miller opened up about how difficult the past year had been and how she wanted to use dance as a new way to express who she is.

After her performance, judge Carrie Ann Inaba told Miller that she could see the pain she had been carrying. She pointed out that Miller seemed in her head during parts of the dance, but highlighted the moment when she let go and smiled.

Hearing comments like that about someone who is often seen as having a perfect life puts so much in perspective. Celebrities can feel so far removed from our everyday lives that it’s easy to forget they experience the same emotions we do.

They have difficult years, they overthink, they get nervous, they cry.

Miller’s emotions were even more apparent during scores when she started crying and shared how she just wanted to leave everything on the floor and do this for herself and her friends. For a few minutes, we saw someone that wasn’t a reality TV personality; she was a person processing a difficult year and using dance to tell a story she couldn’t put into words.

De Laurentiis, paired with pro Alan Bersten, showed another side of vulnerability during her first performance. At 56-years-old, De Laurentiis said she wanted to start a new adventure at the same time as her daughter, Jade, who was beginning one of her own by going off to college.

Watching the rehearsal clips leading up to the dance made it clear just how difficult the experience was for her. She was physically struggling, openly talking about the pain in her body and admitting she was afraid of looking and feeling silly. It was clear how uncomfortable this new experience made her feel.

But she did it anyway. Watching De Laurentiis finish her dance with a huge smile on her face made it impossible not to smile along with her. She looked genuinely proud of herself. When she began to cry during scores, it was hard not to cry with her. Hearing her explain that she couldn’t believe she actually completed the dance and that she wanted to do this for

her daughter was so heartfelt. This is the kind of vulnerability that makes “Dancing with the Stars” so special. She wasn’t trying to convince viewers that she was fearless or naturally talented. She was honest about being scared, struggling and not wanting to embarrass herself.

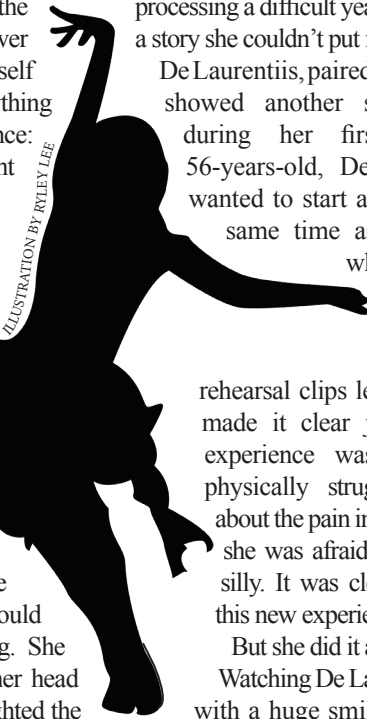
It was so special to see someone who at the end of the day is a mom watching her daughter start a new chapter and deciding to challenge herself with one too.

There was a totally different side of vulnerability that we saw from TV personality Guillermo Rodriguez, paired with pro Witney Carson, from “Jimmy Kimmel Live!” First of all, he is truly a joy to watch. He is so funny and even though he is not a strong dancer, I want to see him go far because of the joy he has brought to everyone’s screen.

His first dance was far from perfect. But instead of letting the mistakes or the struggle of learning the choreography get to him, he laughed, smiled and clearly enjoyed himself and that’s what draws us in so much.

It also shows that vulnerability doesn’t always have to mean crying or sharing something deeply personal. Sometimes, it’s simply being willing to try something you’re not good at and allowing people to see you figure it all out.

For every celebrity on the show, each viewer should be able to look beyond the dance itself and recognize the vulnerability and willingness it takes to put yourself out there in front of millions of viewers. There is something so special about watching the celebrities experience the same feelings we all do from fear, excitement, embarrassments and ultimately pride.



Generation Z can’t get enough trinkets

By **VIVIAN GAGE**
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For my birthday this year, I knew exactly what I wanted. I simply had to have, and couldn’t go without, new Calico Critters.

It was nearly impossible to narrow down the options, torn between the “Biscuit Bear Family,” the “Walnut Squirrel Family” and the “Country Bathroom Set.” I wanted Calico Critter keychains, bumper stickers and magnets. I wanted a mini living room with mini lamps and a mini TV to display my mini critters.

The trinket trend had gotten to me. Whether it’s Labubus, Sonny Angels or Smiskys, there’s something to suck everyone in. Unboxing videos and “trinket scoops” dominate social media, and new “trinket trade boxes” have been popping up in neighborhoods across the U.S.

So what’s the deal with this trinket obsession? Trinkets consist of blind box figures, keychains, charms, enamel pins, mini plushies, capsule toys, small artisan items (ceramics, jewelry, or handmade crafts) and any knickknacks that hold value, according to the blog Life in a Breakdown.

Blind boxes are particularly prominent right now and are probably what comes to mind when you think of modern trinket collection. For example, Twitch streamer and TikToker Vanillamace, who currently has 5.9 million TikTok followers, was rocketed to fame, in part, by her blind box unboxing videos, which now have hundreds of fan edits.

If you look up “blind box” on TikTok, there is an endless stream of videos, many with hundreds of thousands of views, of people opening up their surprise trinkets. The same is true for Instagram and other social media. The hashtag #trinkets has over 350.7K posts on TikTok alone.

Pop Mart, a Chinese toy company best known for its blind boxes, has seen a surge in revenue in the past few years as a result of the trinket trend. According to Time, some argue that the trinket trend was revived by Pop Mart itself, as the seller of Labubus. The company’s “non-mainland revenue grew by 375%...(about \$700 million) in 2024, accounting for nearly 40% of its approximately \$1.8 billion total revenue,” according to Time.

This is a big switch for the company, as almost all of its sales previously came from within China, where cute trinkets were already very popular. The change shows how trinkets have risen in popularity throughout the rest of the world.

Trinket trade boxes started increasing in popularity around American towns during COVID-19 as a way to help communities connect. Many boxes, where people trade items such as art, mugs and fidgets alongside trinkets, are part of the Worldwide Sidewalk Joy project, which now connects “2,450 spots in 19 countries” through its online map.

The boxes encourage people to leave a trinket behind and take one home of equal value. There’s currently one box in Hamden and a few in New Haven, including one on Greenwich Ave. and a trinket trading table inside Witch Bitch Thrift.

Some speculate the trinket craze is rooted in nostalgia. College students and young professionals may be looking for tangible reminders of their childhood, like a Littlest Pet Shop toy, to help ground them through life’s stresses. Even new trinkets, like Labubus, can bring back those bits of childhood joy associated with opening something new and treasuring all its tiny details.

Many videos have gone viral of adults playing with these toys and giving them absurd

storylines, like the TikTok account “Keeping up with the Sylvanians,” which has garnered a big following. The drama is always absurd, with Calico Critters getting pregnant or picking extreme fights. For those of us who made up crazy plots for our dolls and toys when we were younger, this feels extremely familiar.

The trend could also reflect an economic shift, a sign of recession. According to Pedestrian, “when the economy tanks, people pivot to small luxuries or cheaper substitutes to soothe their financial anxieties.”

Basically, Generation Z is more willing to spend on cheap items that bring them comfort, especially when facing financial anxiety. Trinkets are normally under \$15 and scratch our itch for a tangible item that brings us a quick bit of joy without breaking the bank.

Trinkets also lure you in because they encourage you to form a collection. Why get one Calico Critter when you could collect an entire family? Why stop at a family when you could have a village?

Blind boxes are extremely popular because they function like a slot machine. Mystery box collectibles “psychology operates on the most powerful reinforcement system ever studied in behavioral psychology: variable ratio reinforcement,” according to the Rowan Center.

Variable ratio reinforcement works when the reward is unpredictable, and you never know which attempt will succeed. The uncertainty itself fuels persistence and makes you reach for

the next blind box because “it just might be the ultra-rare pull.”

All these reasons combined offer a strong view into why Gen Z has doubled down on their collection of cute, small and relatively cheap items.

Anyway, I’m sure you’re wondering what critters I received for my birthday. Well, I got two families and a kitchen set, which I then obsessed over the second they were within my grasp. I toyed with how to place my new Sylvanian families so they could all face each other, and stared at the tiny fridge I received, enamored, for hours. My heart melted at the sight of miniature eggs and bell peppers to stock in the fake fridge.

While I may be falling to consumerism, or fruitlessly battling a recession, I am not ashamed. Trinkets are cute and collecting them is irresistible, and I don’t think this is a trend that will be going away any time soon.

