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A Passion for Pom, Family and Community

## Meet Heritage High Pom Coach Jena Orlandi

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# A Passion for Pom, Family and Community

## Meet Heritage High Pom Coach Jena Orlandi

COMPILED BY JANE MEADE-DEAN | FAMILY PHOTOS BY SOPHIE SPRADLIN  
PHOTO OF JENA AND HER ASSISTANT COACHES BY ANITA MCKEITH

For Jena Orlandi, creativity has always been part of the picture.

Long before she was designing pompon routines for Heritage High School or working behind the chair as a hairstylist, Jena found her creative outlet through painting, photography and dance. Today, those interests come together in a life that balances her career, family and more than a decade of coaching young athletes in the Saginaw community.

Jena and her husband, José, live in Greenfield Acres with their children, Esmé, 2½, and Arlo, 10 months. Their household also includes Goldendoodle Daisy and two long-haired cats, Nora and Remy.

The family moved to the Saginaw Township neighborhood in 2014, drawn to its peaceful atmosphere, mature trees, spacious lots and mix of longtime residents and young families.

"It has truly cultivated a strong sense of community," Jena says. That community connection extends far beyond the neighborhood.

### From the art studio to the salon

Jena's creative path began with art. After graduating from Heritage High School, she attended Delta College before heading to Savannah, Georgia, to study at Savannah College of Art and Design. Although she enjoyed her time at SCAD, she ultimately missed home and returned to the area, earning a bachelor's degree in art with a minor in graphic design from Saginaw Valley State University.

Her career eventually took an unexpected turn.

After working for several years as a receptionist in a hair salon, Jena realized she missed the salon environment. With encouragement from José, she enrolled in cosmetology school after graduating from SVSU.

Today, she sees hair as another form of artistic expression. "My background in painting, photography, sculpture, and graphic design gives me a unique eye for color, composition, and texture that directly translates to working behind the chair," Jena says.

That same creative eye serves her well as head coach of Heritage Varsity Pom.

### A Heritage tradition

Jena's connection to pompon began as a student. She grew up taking tap, jazz, ballet and hip-hop classes and loved the combination of athleticism, performance and elaborate costumes.

She also attended cheer clinics and began participating in pom in eighth grade at White Pine Middle School. As a freshman at Heritage, she earned a spot on the varsity team, and the team won the state championship in 2005. The experience left a lasting impression.

Heritage's pom program was established in 1989 as one of the first in Michigan and has built a strong reputation for excellence. The program now has eight state championships, including back-to-back titles in 2025 and 2026, for the first time in more than two decades.

"We are still beaming with pride over winning back-to-back state championships in both 2025 and 2026!" Jena says. Now, the team is setting its sights on a three-peat.

For Jena, returning to the program as a coach has been especially meaningful. Now entering her 11th season as the Heritage Pom coach, Jena says the position requires an enormous investment of time and energy, but the rewards extend well beyond competition results.

"Beyond the trophies, making a lasting impact on these athletes is the most fulfilling part of coaching," Jena says. Her coaching résumé includes numerous top-three state finishes and four High Kick championships in 2017, 2022, 2023 and 2025. At the team's banquet last year, she received a 10-year coaching achievement plaque, a recognition she describes as deeply moving.

The work behind those accomplishments is substantial. During the competitive season, the team practices six days a week, generally for three hours at a time. The nine-month season includes an overnight summer camp, High Kick Competition in November, Regionals in January and the State Championship in February.

The team also performs at Heritage football, basketball and soccer games, participates in the school's homecoming parade and volunteers at community events, including Walk for Hope at Saginaw Valley. The athletes have even performed at a Great Lakes Loons



baseball game and a Detroit Pistons game.

Creating a pom routine is itself a significant undertaking. "Countless hours outside of practice" go into selecting music, creating formations and keeping an audience engaged, Jena says. A single routine can include 30 to 40 different formations, while athletes work to maintain precision, unity and strength.

Jena says her husband's love and support are essential to her coaching success. "José is truly the ultimate behind the scenes team manager," she says. "His unwavering encouragement and occasional creative ideas serve as a

backbone of everything I do, and I simply couldn't do it all without him."

#### Lessons that last

For Jena, coaching has never been just about trophies. The lessons she learned as a student — discipline, determination, commitment and the value of working toward a common goal — continue to shape the way she leads her athletes.

She has also had the unique experience of coaching several generations of Heritage pom participants. Some of the coaches currently working alongside her were once teenagers she coached herself.

"I have coached every one of them since they were teenagers," Jena says. "Seeing

them grow into smart, caring, tenacious young adults, and blossom each year into more confident coaches is truly rewarding."

Jess Ramos and Niyah Martinez are two former Heritage pom team members who now work alongside Jena. "Jess and Niyah started years ago as assistant coaches, training alongside me to become vital extensions of this program," Jena says. "This will mark Jess's sixth year and Niyah's fifth, and the way we respect, trust, and collaborate with one another has been instrumental to our success. Having a coaching staff that gels so seamlessly makes everything run smoothly and brings so much joy to the process. We've reached a point where we practically read each other's minds.

They are so much more than my co-coaches. They feel like family."

Through the years, Jena has remained connected with many of the athletes she coached and their parents, with some relationships developing into lasting friendships.

The team's presence throughout the community also creates opportunities to bring people together. Whether performing beneath Friday night lights, marching in the homecoming parade or competing at a state championship, Heritage Pom has become part of the community's shared traditions.

Jena hopes the young athletes carry those experiences with them long after their final competition. "My greatest hope is that these lessons inspire them to stay involved and continue giving back to Saginaw as they grow older," she says.

### Finding a family rhythm

Jena says her home life offers a refreshing shift from the structure of pom season, embracing a fun and flexible pace alongside her two young children and three pets.

She and José met years after their high school days at Heritage. Although they attended the same school, they moved in different circles and never really crossed paths. When Jena was 20, they finally met at a get-together hosted by her brother, who had graduated with José in 2006. The connection was immediate.

They married in Saginaw in 2019, celebrating with family and friends at the historic Montague Inn and the Andersen Enrichment Center. José was born in Puerto Rico, and many of his relatives traveled from there for the wedding.

Their rehearsal dinner featured traditional Spanish paella, while the reception took place outdoors in the Andersen Enrichment Center's rose garden. Jena's mother is the center's director, making the location especially meaningful.

These days, their favorite family moments are much simpler. With Esmé and Arlo still young, the family has



The 2025 Championship team

not yet filled the calendar with formal activities. Instead, they spend their time exploring the area together.

They visit Saginaw parks and playgrounds, walk the rail trail near their home, visit the community garden, enjoy ice cream and spend summer days at Haithco Beach. Esmé has developed a love of reading, and she and Jena enjoy looking for new books at local shops. Those everyday outings have become some of the family's favorite memories. The Orlandi's fur babies are beloved members of the family. "Our pets bring so much fun to everyday life while teaching our children empathy, compassion, and responsibility," Jena says.

Nora and Remy joined the family in 2014, shortly after Jena and José moved into their home, and Daisy arrived in 2020. Both Jena and José grew up around animals, so a busy household feels perfectly natural to them.

"Some days it certainly feels like a zoo, but we wouldn't want it any other way," Jena says.

### Connected to community

Between her work, coaching and family life, Jena has plenty to keep her busy. Yet the connections she has made through Heritage Pom remain one of the most rewarding parts of her life in Saginaw Township.

Coaching has introduced her to countless students and families she might never otherwise have met. It has also reinforced the importance of showing up — for a team, a community and the people who count on you.

The same qualities that make a successful coach have become important parts of her family life, too.

"Teaching, encouraging, keeping your cool, problem-solving, love, and believing in others" are shared between coaching and parenting, Jena says.

Both require patience, dedication and a willingness to keep going when things get difficult.

For Jena, that combination of creativity, family and community has created a life that feels uniquely her own. From designing a complex pom routine to helping a young athlete gain confidence, creating something behind the salon chair or taking her children for a walk close to home, she continues to find meaning in the things she does and the people she does them with.

And with another Heritage pom season ahead, she is ready for the next challenge — and hoping to add another championship to an already impressive legacy.