

From the ashes, a new life

After surviving the collapse of the World Trade Center, LuAnne O'Rourke decided to follow her heart and teach Irish dancing

By Ciara McGuigan
letters@irishecho.com

From the burning embers of the World Trade Center came LuAnn O'Rourke's decision to change her life forever.

An IT training director working in Manhattan up until the September 11 attack, O'Rourke had been struggling to find the time for both her demanding career and her flourishing Irish dancing school in White Plains, NY.

With the life-shattering events of that day however, came O'Rourke's recognition that it was time for a change.

"I finally decided to focus full-time on the dance school after surviving the World Trade Center attack in 2001," said the dance teacher and qualified adjudicator.

"I went to work as normal that morning and was sitting at my desk when the building started to shake," explained O'Rourke. "It was a crazy thing — it was definitely one of those moments when your life flashes before your eyes, I thought it was over."

"All those drills that those big buildings do just go out the window," she added. "Your instinct is to get out."

With a New York City firefighter as a father, O'Rourke says it was her dad's words of warning to her that rang true as the World Trade Center began to collapse.

"He always said that if something ever happened, to get out and get away, and that's what I remembered," she said. "My stairwell wasn't too bad — there were firefighters coming up as we were going



down — but I managed to get out. That was about 20 minutes before the building came down," she recalled.

Seven years on, O'Rourke says she is now certain that she made the right decision to follow her heart — and her feet — into a full-time career in Irish dancing.

Born and raised in Yonkers, N.Y., O'Rourke began her dancing career at an early age, having been inspired by a St Patrick's Day performance she had seen at her elementary school.

"I have always had a passion for Irish dancing and always knew that running my own school was something I would do," she said. And so she did.

"The O'Rourke Academy of Irish Dance has doubled in size each year since I started it part-time back in 1995 with three students," said O'Rourke.

Back then, she had no idea what running a school would involve.

"The school quickly [grew to] 100 students, so I was balancing two full-time jobs in a short amount of time," she said of the ever-increasing demand for traditional dance instruction.

But it wasn't just the demand from students that ate up her all time — it was also the ever-changing, ever-developing face



Luanne O'Rourke and some of her students.

of the traditional art that required her attention.

"Another challenge is keeping up with the competitive choreography for dancers," said O'Rourke. To meet this challenge, she now calls on the talents of master choreographer Michael Smith, of the renowned Smith-Houlihan School from Boston. Last summer, O'Rourke fulfilled her dream of becoming an Irish dancing adjudicator, certified to judge any level of An Coimisiun Le Rinci Gaelaca Irish dancing competitions.

With dancers from a variety of backgrounds taking part in classes in White Plains, O'Rourke says that she's delighted there is such a huge interest in the art in the area.

"I wasn't sure if White Plains would be a 'hub' for Irish dancing," she said. "When I was beginning, [most classes] were set up in the Bronx and Yonkers. Lucky for me 'Riverdance' had just exploded on the scene, so there was tremendous interest in Irish dance."

And that interest hasn't petered out over the years. If anything, says

O'Rourke, the fascination with Irish dancing has grown enormously and captured the imagination of many communities in the last ten years.

"I myself am half Irish and half Italian and I would say that only about 25 per cent of my dancers are of full Irish decent. I have students of all different cultures including Asian, Italian, Hispanic and Jewish, to name just a few!"

Hoping for continued success with her popular school, the busy mother of three says she hopes to see her solo performers and ceili teams progress and develop.

"I love to work with the dancers and help them achieve competitive goals," she said. "I hope to qualify them for overseas competitions such as the All-Irelands and world championships."

"I wouldn't trade this for the world," says O'Rourke. "I'm very lucky to be doing something I love."

For more information on The O'Rourke Academy of Irish Dance contact LuAnn O'Rourke-Boyd, TCRG/ADCRG at www.orourkeirishdancers.com