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Story Expired On: **March 15, 2008**

Dance Academy is Gem of Irish Cultural Heritage

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Published: March 15, 2007

The art of Irish dance is alive and well in White Plains, N.Y., where it bridges generation gaps, disciplines the mind and body, and promotes Irish cultural heritage throughout the community. Where is this center of Hibernian zeal? The O'Rourke Academy of Irish Dance on Lyon Place.

Today, the bright, vibrant dance studio on Lyon Place is comprised of beautiful hardwood floors. Trophies and medals adorn its walls as evidence of director LuAnn O'Rourke-Boyd's accomplished students. A national and international champion dancer in her own right, O'Rourke-Boyd has watched her dance school blossom from its humble beginning in 1997, comprised of only five students, to today's thriving community of 100 dancers, spanning the ages from three to 50 years old. O'Rourke-Boyd says, "The students and parents of my school are like family to me. I have had the great pleasure of seeing many of my students develop from preschoolers to college students, many of whom have participated in local and international competitions."



Photo credit: *Michael Pellegrin*

Students at the O'Rourke Academy share a common trait: passion for Irish Dance. Some enjoy it casually as their preferred form of exercise. Others become competitive dancers with rigorous schedules and are dedicated to the meticulous study of their craft. In fact, countless O'Rourke Academy dancers have emerged as champions in national competitions known as Feis'. One of the Academy's adult teams has been the recurring champion team of North America.

For many at the O'Rourke Academy, dance has become a family affair. White Plains resident, Kevin Barry, who dances on the same team as his sister Jeanine Barry-McCarrick, was inspired by his daughter and O'Rourke Academy dancer, Meghan, to take up Irish dance himself. Currently, both father's and daughter's teams have received awards in competitions.

The Ryan family of White Plains boasts four members of the O'Rourke Academy: Mary Broderick Ryan, daughters Maureen (21), Lindsay (15) and son Jack (8). Maureen and her mom have been with the school from the beginning and were members of the Ceili team named North American Champions last July in San Diego. Lindsay dances on the Ceili team and is a preliminary champion solo dancer; Jack, too, is a preliminary champion.

In addition to being a family bonding experience, the study of Irish dance is an especially beneficial practice for teenagers, explains Christine Roithmayr who followed her 14-year-old daughter Emma, the school's first open champion dancer, into Irish Dance. "It's such a discipline for life," explains Roithmayr. "You become physically fit and mentally sharp from learning precise steps." The rigorous and absorbing schedule of classes keeps kids out of trouble. The studio becomes "a second home, where students work hard, have fun, and develop great friendships." Students who become competitive dancers learn that "sometimes it goes your way and sometimes it doesn't, which is an important life lesson," says Roithmayr. Emma will compete in the North American Championship this summer in Ottawa.

Dancers at the O'Rourke Academy are divided into levels from beginner to open champion and participate in a recital each spring. They also perform for the White Plains community at a variety of venues, from the more classic St. Patrick's Day Parade to hospitals and nursing homes. Recently, O'Rourke Academy teens performed at the White Plains High School Talent Show in The Jiggy Showcase, where students merged Irish Dance with Hip Hop.

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Last month, O'Rourke dancers—Cindy Dermody, Maureen Dolan, Eileen Eustace, Karen Hanley of White Plains, Jeannie Kieran, Kathleen Meehan, Mary Broderick Ryan, and Laura Treseler—traveled to Ireland to participate in the All Ireland competition. They placed second in the eight-hand dance competition and first in the four-hand.

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In recognition of being an invaluable keeper of Irish Cultural Heritage, director LuAnn O'Rourke-Boyd will receive a proclamation from the Westchester County Board of Legislators March 12, marking the kick-off of the county's Irish History and Heritage month. While being one of White Plains' gems of Irish Cultural Heritage, the studio also serves the White Plains Community as a great rental space for a variety of classes. Anyone—Irish or not—interested in classes, or to rent beautiful, brand new space in the studio, are encouraged to contact O'Rourke-Boyd at (917) 453-0375.

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