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TAPPING INTO FUN

Dance Class Lets Women Cut Loose a Step at a Time

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The neighborhood surrounding Lawnton Elementary School in Swatara Twp. is quiet but for the energetic taps and infectious laughter pouring from the auditorium doors.

Vicki Riordan calls out to two lines of women, who range in age from 24 to mid-50s: "One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight."

Despite the heat in the unventilated room, the women let their feet fly and their smiles widen. Vicki's Tap Pups have started an evening lesson.

Tonight, it's an intermediate group, practicing in the hopes of advancing. Vicki's Tap Pups, owned and run by Riordan, offers three levels of tap dancing lessons for adults.

"Stop! Look at your arms! Where are they?" Vicki chastises the class with a grin. As the routine picks up again, one student's misstep causes her to break formation. She is greeted with a hug mid-routine from the woman beside her, and the two burst into laughter.

That sort of bond among students is typical of Riordan's classes.

"We just all love each other," said Lynne Ritter of Harrisburg, who has been in Tap Pups since 2003. "You can't help but get along with everybody. I think tap is what we have in common, because everyone has different jobs around here. But it's nice because it blends together, and we all have our tap. And we all love it. You can see it on our faces."

Riordan's Tap Pups is an offshoot of Vicki's Studio of Rhythm, a dance studio Riordan opened in 1964, closed when she married and reopened after her divorce.

With two sons and no child support, Riordan had to do something.

"Things were beginning to catch up with me financially," she said. "At that time, there was a big '50s revival happening in the mid-'80s, and so I relied on what I knew best, which is dance."

Focusing on adults, she expanded that first '50s/'60s class through the years to include country Western line dance, tap and wellness programs.

Tap Pups began nine years ago with 17 dancers, 10 of whom are still in the program.

Riordan describes Tap Pups as a strong, loyal community. The mobile class is taught in three townships to more than 60 tappers.

Riordan's students say the classes have changed their lives -- physically and spiritually.

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"[Tap Pups] actually helped me when I went on a trip to Europe, climbing all the big high steps and things," said Becky Bacher of Highspire, a tapper since 2000. "I would never have been able to do it had I not been coming to this. I'm beet red now, but I'm not going to die. The stamina, it's just incredible."

"[Tap Pups] has so encouraged me," Ritter added. "It made me realize that I can do things. Vicki's very good that way. She makes you think you can do it. It drives you harder. She makes you feel like you could do anything."

A longtime dancer, Jessica Davis of Steelton finds the atmosphere welcoming.

"You really can't find adult classes in which you are taken seriously," she said. "There are a lot of dance schools that say they offer adult classes, but then you're around 10-, 12-year-old kids and you feel awkward. She gives women of all ages a chance to really get back into their tap shoes, be themselves. Everyone's here for one reason, to tap dance and have fun."

For Riordan, who has been dancing since she was 3, dance has become not only a way to support herself, but also a means of contributing to the community and connecting with other women.

Tap Pups performs a recital for the community each spring and this year raised awareness and money for the YWCA of Greater Harrisburg to support single mothers.

"Because I have always loved to dance and was so fortunate to learn from the best, I developed my own philosophy and style that translates to a genuine love and enthusiasm," she said. "I honestly believe that this was my calling."

As the class winds down, the women gather near the door, chatting and laughing. Whatever their moods were before class, they've all achieved the happiness Riordan seeks to give them.

"You can have the worst day at work, and you come here, and as soon as we do our warm-ups, all your worries are gone," Bacher said.

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