

Bruins Live

	1	0	
--	---	---	--

2nd Prd 2:10

Stepping through time, with dance in her heart



By **Kathy Shiels Tully** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT MARCH 16, 2014

“I didn’t really want to teach. I just wanted to dance forever,” says Rita O’Shea, Boston’s grande dame of Irish dance.

That changed when she was just 17, a dancer in her prime in her native Galway. O’Shea was selected by her Irish dance teacher, Eilis Ni Shim (Gaelic for Lily Simpson), to take over teaching classes.

CONTINUE READING BELOW ▼

Simpson’s husband had suffered a heart attack, and unless someone else could step in, she said, she was going to close the school.

O’Shea’s original plans — to become a schoolteacher — shifted from the classroom to the dance floor. Six decades later, she’s still teaching, although an ocean away from where she started.

Today, classes are held through her school, the O’Shea-Chaplin Academy of Irish Dance.

Established in Boston in the 1960s after O’Shea moved to the United States, the school is run by Rita and her daughter, Lisa Chaplin McAllister, also of Melrose and a championship dancer herself.

The academy’s dozen-plus locations include sites in Burlington, Danvers, Lawrence, Lowell, Wakefield and Winchester, and its reach extends to Boston, Quincy, and North Attleborough.

In celebration of St. Patrick’s Day, O’Shea’s dancers will perform at 11:30 a.m. Monday in Boston City Hall as guests of Mayor Martin J. Walsh.

Ensembles from her school were also lined up to perform at several private functions this weekend, and to dance at Boston’s Faneuil Hall and in the Lawrence parade on Saturday.



O'SHEA FAMILY PHOTO/FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

An undated family photo shows Rita O’Shea with some of her championship trophies in Irish dancing.

Looking much younger than her 76 years, O'Shea professes no plans to stop, despite having had both hips replaced and surviving breast cancer.

“I live to dance and I dance to live,” she says, matter of factly. Though she no longer performs, she dances when she demonstrates a step so students can observe and learn, then corrects them as they do it.

Keeping up in conversation with O'Shea is no small feat.

Racing through highlights of her Irish dance history, from her beginnings at age 3½ — “very young to start,” she says — to becoming a registered teacher, adjudicator (judge), and examiner (judge of judges) with the Irish Dancing Commission in Dublin, her brogue-wrapped words fly faster than a step-dancer's swirling feet.

What becomes clear is how widely she is known and respected, not just in the Boston area, but around the globe.

At the Irish dance world championships last spring, held for the second time in Boston, O'Shea was honored by the entire Irish dance community, including dancers and teachers from other schools.

Lily Simpson, now 89, who eventually became president of the Irish Dancing Commission, attended the event, as did Boston's mayor at the time, Thomas M. Menino.

And just last week, O'Shea was feted at a sold-out dinner gala to mark her 60 years of teaching, held in Melrose's Soldiers and Sailors Memorial Building.

Many of her former students attended, along with 25 teachers she has trained.

“Rita's taught thousands and thousands of adults and children,” her daughter says, many of whom have become teachers and judges themselves, and also professional dancers in productions like “Riverdance” and “Lord of the Dance.”



KAYANA SZYMCZAK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Rita O'Shea was at the center of a rehearsal for students preparing to compete at last spring's World Irish Dance Championships in Boston.

“Rita was very influential to me,” says Kevin McCormack, 20, of Braintree, home from touring with “Dance Masters” recently in Germany.

A champion dancer who’s been taking lessons at the O’Shea-Chaplin Academy since age 6, he attends advanced classes in Boston’s Brighton section.

O’Shea teaches more than just Irish dance, he said, embedding skills and attributes that last a lifetime: discipline, hard work, and self-esteem.

“She knows if you’re not putting in your best, and she’ll get it out of you in some way, a very positive, motivating way,” McCormack says. “She’ll say, ‘Let’s figure it out so you can put your all into it.’”

“For her, it’s all about friendship, being a good sport. She’s looking at the whole person and being happy for others.”

That applies even if a dancer is not training with her, says Lisa O’Neill, whose daughter, Siobhan, 17, attends the Murray Academy of Irish Dance in Exeter, N.H.

Recalling last November’s New England Oireachtas championship, O’Neill said, “Rita came up to Siobhan and gave her a big hug and told her she danced beautifully. Rita loves Irish dance and she loves all the dancers.”

“Rita makes such a connection, people become her friends for life,” says Chaplin McAllister, who left a successful career in nursing to follow her mother into teaching dance.

“She’s a strong character, with a passion for life and a passion for dancing,” Chaplin McAllister says. “She has so much energy. She exhausts me. She’s always full speed ahead. . . She’s go, go, go. She will never say no.”

O’Shea helps the younger children in their lessons, holding hands, one on one, to lead them through dance steps. Older students are given verbal instruction.

Tuesday nights, O’Shea leads drop-in groups in traditional team dancing at Harrington’s Pub in Wakefield, where Lisa O’Neill is an owner.

Perhaps the greatest gift a teacher can receive is when a student expresses a desire to teach.

In O'Shea's case, there are about 40 former students teaching and judging, from Celine Hession, one of O'Shea's early students in Galway who recently celebrated her 50th anniversary as a teacher, to McCormack, who is taking the certification exams to become a teacher.

Maeve McAllister, 12, O'Shea's granddaughter, plans to become a teacher, too.

O'Shea hopes to be there to guide the way: "Isn't that what you hope for your own child? To reach for the goal they want and to follow their dreams?"

Kathy Shiels Tully can be reached at kathyshielstully@gmail.com.

Get Today's Headlines from the Globe in your inbox:

SIGN UP

[Privacy Policy](#)

0 COMMENTS