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Dancing the light fantastic: Tapping into a craze revitalized from the days of early America

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Mary Wall's Tempe studio gives aspiring professionals, as well as those merely conscious of tap dancing's health benefits, a chance to improve their skills and enjoy added mobility, age not withstanding. This year's observance of National Tap Dance Day is coming up May 25.

By Joyce Coronel

Dance studio owner Mary Wall started developing her talent at the gawky age of 5, hoping to one day join the famed Rockettes in New York City. What she didn't know was that the renowned precision performers have a height requirement: Every one must be at least 5 feet 6 inches tall.

Small problem: During adolescence, Wall topped out at 5 foot 3.

"A dance teacher told my parents, 'She's not going to be a Rockette. They won't even audition her,'" Wall recalls.

Her dream of a future in dance didn't end there though. She went on to college to major in theater arts, putting her dance moves to work in musicals.

Later, she spent years teaching dance at Mesa Community College and at Marilyn Bostic's Ballet Centre in south Tempe, as well as at other area colleges and venues.

All the while, said Wall, she dreamed of having her own studio. Two years ago, that dream became a reality when Wall to Wall Dance Center opened in Tempe.

"I love it. I can do what I want to do," Wall told Wrangler News. That means tapping her way to success, one class at a time. Some of the smaller classes have just three or four students; others boast 10 or 12. The studio is geared toward adults and offers lessons Monday through Friday.

"We take some teenagers, but I tell them up front, 'You've got to behave like an adult,'" Wall said. Many of her students are retirees, but the average age is 50-something. Her most senior student is 89, she said.

“It’s a lot more fun than walking on a treadmill,” Wall said of the physical benefits. “You are getting wonderful physical activity and you’re having a good time with it, too.”

Liisa Walimaa has been taking tap dancing lessons from Wall for three years.

“Tap is fantastic. It is something anyone can do,” Walimaa said. “It’s just plain fun.”

Walimaa said she dances other styles too, but those all require partners. “Tap is a great way for me to be able to dance without a partner—to tap into that creativity on my own,” she added.

Wall oversees two performance groups that convene at the studio. One is for students over 50, another is an evening group for working people who can’t meet during the day. They recently performed at Mesa Community College to raise money for their dance scholarship fund and shortly afterward participated in a charity event to support a group that’s going to Peru this summer to build a school.

The performance groups have tapped their way into the hearts of nursing home residents with performances there, too, and once auditioned for the hit television series, America’s Got Talent.

“I also get a lot of theater people who are preparing,” Wall said. “They’ve got a show coming up that they know they’re going to have to tap for their audition, so they’ll come in and maybe do a drop-in class just to get their dance skills up to speed.”

Classes span 55 minutes, and Wall offers options when it comes to paying for all those thrills on the dance floor. You can sign up for the entire course during the first couple weeks—a cheaper option—or wait and see how you like it and pay by the class. Tap shoes are a must and can be purchased at local dance shops.

Wall’s also got a small collection of shoes she’s acquired through the years from students who often pick them up at area thrift stores.

But what if you happen to be one of those unfortunate souls who has never danced in your life?

“We are the place for you,” Wall declared. “I offer what are called Never Too Late classes. These are classes for people with no previous experience whatsoever and I take things at a nice easy pace. I thoroughly explain things.”

For all you late-bloomers out there, here’s your chance. The 11-week program introduces all the basic steps.

“Never Too Late really gets people started and gives them that nice introduction so they’re ready to take real classes,” Wall said.

Information: w2wdance.com