

10 Questions: A love of dance

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Kathy Francis loves to bring out the soul of a dancer.

Director of the Francis Performing Arts Company in Alma since 1993, Francis (nee Whitman) is a home town girl.

After moving to Chicago where she studied under a host of well known dancers, she moved back to Alma to start her dance academy with 70 students.

She now has more than 200.

Francis and her husband George, a staging technician with the Lansing Convention Center, have one son, Sean, a student at Grand Valley State.

It's been said that just when the young dance student "gets it," when she at last begins to understand how to move her body with grace, when she understands that it's not just a matter of learning the steps, she loses interest and moves on to other things.

A lot of them do stay all the way through. I've been here for 15 years and some of my students that I had when they were three are now seniors in high school

You have that "it" factor -the students who have that natural rhythm and grace and they love to perform. Dancing is in their soul and that appears when they're young. Their technique (at a young age)- maybe not so much. But they are dancing with their hearts.

Some in middle school make different choices but a lot of them stick with it. That's my goal - to get them to understand that dance is life long.

Do any of them quit and then reenroll?

A lot of them do come back. And (even if they don't), they value what they did. I have a lot of adult classes, some with teenagers and some just for adults.

Kathleen Francis, Academy of Performing Arts director, leads her students through some steps during class on Wednesday night. *Sun Photograph by RYAN EVON*

What classes do adults take?

Ballet, tap and hip hop. There were some parents who said if they didn't have to perform in a recital, they'd like to learn hip hop. They're having a ball. I don't teach that one. A recent graduate of Grand Valley State teaches that and Nic Gareiss, (a locally known dancer,) teaches some tap classes.

How many classes do you teach? And do you teach Highland Dancing?

Out of about 50 classes, I teach about 22. Some are just half hour sessions. We're open Monday through Thursday from about 4 p.m. until about 9:30 p.m.

No Highland dancing. We started out with Christie Freestone and we have a good relationship with her. We just performed with them at the (Soaring Eagle) Casino for the Michigan Association of Hospital Advocates. (Highland dancers performed) and our group did jazz and tap pieces. They loved it.

We try to do a lot of community activities. We've performed with the Gratiot County Players magic show, Come Home to Alma (Christmas celebration) and we bring dance to the schools. We performed at Hillcrest and Luce and we're going to St. Louis schools (this week.)

We've done "Peter Pan," "The Magic Toy Shoppe," "Alice in Wonderland," "The Ballet of Creation."

You choreograph your dances. How does that come about? How long does that take?

I get inspiration from anywhere. It can be music of course, or a theme or story. We draw from a lot of inspirational ideas.

As you set it on the dancers, it can take six or eight weeks. It's a process. You can see if it's working. You can see something you like and put that in. It comes together as you work.

Kathleen Francis jokes with her dance students during stretches on Wednesday at the Academy of Performing Arts, 319 North State Street in Alma.

Sun Photograph by RYAN EVON

After 15 years in business, you likely have heard it all or, or nearly all. What do you get asked most often?

What is my favorite style of dance? I truly love them all. Ballet led me to dance. When I was younger, it was jazz. You could put your own personality in. I always loved tap and the challenges of the footwork.

I can appreciate them all. Some people love belly dancing. That's not something I've done, but I can appreciate it.

How important is costuming?

(Laughing) It's a pain in the neck. It's important and it's fun for the students. My concern is that the costumes be appropriate. I get compliments all the time. They are ordered. They get more expensive as time goes on and we try to keep costs down. But they are secondary to the dance.

Is there a downside to being a dance instructor?

I can get to feeling down and frustrated. Not that it happens a lot. But every time I do I get a call or a letter or a note telling me what a difference I've made. It always happens.

The hardest part for me is trying to make all the people happy all the time. It's impossible but I'm a pleaser.

Tell me about your dancers.

I have three performing groups in the Francis Performing Arts Company this year. Company One is the high school students and Company Two is the middle school. The youngest company - Company Three - is made up of fifth and sixth graders.

They come from all over: St. Johns, Mt. Pleasant, Breckenridge, Weidman.

Why dance? Why teach dance?

The main reason I do what I do is to bring dance, music and the arts to people. I can make a difference to so many kids. There are those that may not find interests in school but they can find passion in dance. I do believe it makes a difference.