

Annie McBride has taught thousands of East Bay students the art of Irish dance

By Theresa Harrington
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When Annie McBride learned jigs and other Irish dances decades ago as a girl growing up in Scotland, music wasn't played on stereo systems or iPods.

Instead, McBride's teachers "lilted" the music, singing tunes as they called out the dance steps to their students.

After immigrating to the East Bay at age 19 in 1959, McBride has carried on this tradition, teaching thousands of students the joys of Irish dance.

"Hop, one-, two-three-four," she sang out to students during a recent class in Concord. "Kick, hop. Try that again for Annie. Right treble, left treble. Good girl! You've got it!"

The student smiled as McBride rewarded her with two enthusiastic thumbs up.

She also uses recorded music, but her students love her endearing lilt. And there's no question she knows her stuff.

"I think her greatest single strength is rigor," said Seamus Donohue, an Irish immigrant who takes dance lessons from McBride with his 11-year-old daughter, Lile. "She has encyclopedic knowledge of dance and attention to detail. To pass on something that's really an oral tradition successfully, you have to be a stickler so it doesn't get lost."

McBride has become known as a dance master in the Bay Area. She has coached boys and girls to the World Championship competition in Dublin, Ireland, and also judges competitions herself.

She has organized a feis (Gaelic term for festival,

pronounced "fesh")

in Oakland for nearly 30 years. Her students also perform locally at weddings and other events, such as St. Patrick's Day celebrations.

McBride's Concord students have danced at Ed's Mudville Grill in Clayton on the holiday for about a decade, said Mac McCormick, the restaurant's general manager, whose daughter also took lessons from McBride.

"They're awesome," he said. "They go in age stages, from the littlest ones to the bigger ones. So it goes from cute to very entertaining. We just love having them. It's great for everybody."

McBride's students enjoy performing, but some of them also said they feel driven to compete. A few of her top students practice for hours at home and take classes three or more times a week.

"It's exercise, but it's really fun to compete," said Maren Frye, 10, of Berkeley, after performing at an Irish dinner in Oakland this month. "I like the soft shoe better because you bounce and you're more airborne."

Maren is one of McBride's star dancers and will compete in the World Championship's "under 11" division. McBride starts off beginners with soft shoe dances, in which they leap and hop gracefully and nearly silently across the floor, with their toes pointed, arms straight at their sides.

Advanced students progress to hard shoes, tapping

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loudly and sometimes thunderously in a frenzied pace made famous by Michael Flatley's "Riverdance" production.

McBride's business boomed when Flatley burst onto the dance scene in 1994, inspiring little girls and boys around the world to imitate his steps, she said. At the height of Irish dance popularity, McBride said her Western region feis drew about 1,200 competitors.

Last year, about 700 students from the region competed, she said. Her Oakland-based school now offers classes in Dublin, Concord, San Ramon and Vallejo to about 160 students, down from close to 250 during the Riverdance craze, she added. She offers courses for all ages and skill levels.

McBride teaches six days a week and said she has no desire to retire. Her daughter also teaches and her granddaughter is carrying on the tradition for a third generation.

She attributes her school's success in part to her willingness to adapt as Irish dance has changed, with students leaping higher or dancing on their toes.

"Some old-time teachers are opposed to change," she said. "But if it encourages the dancing and gets people interested in our culture, I think it's wonderful, the new choreographies. I'd like to be starting out now. I'd like to do it all over again."

DETAILS

- Students from the McBride School of Irish Dance will present St. Patrick's Day performances from 4 to 9 p.m. Thursday at Ed's Mudville Grill, 6200 Center St., in Clayton. For details, call 925-673-0333.
- Call 510-530-6240 or go to www.mcbrideirishdancers.com for details about the school.
- Watch an audio slide show at ContraCostaTimes.com.



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