

## **Irish Dance Academy Adds To Culture And Diversity Of Shorewood**

Excerpted from Shorewood Today Magazine, May 2009

Irish dancing has been Aine McMenemy-Johnson's passion since she was four years old. She decided to share that love when she founded the McMenemy Irish Dance Academy in 2005. McMenemy-Johnson chose to locate in Shorewood because she saw a need in the north shore. Besides, she and her husband, Doug Johnson, live here and both love the community and family feeling of the Village. Aine especially enjoys walking to work.

Aine opened her first school in her basement with just five students. The school grew quickly and soon even their next location on East Capitol Drive was, as the Irish might say, "a wee-bit small." By November 2007, they were ready to make the next move to their current location at 3948 N. Maryland Ave. With remodeling and renovation, the studio comfortably accommodates the present enrollment of 120 students. Aine and a staff of six world medalists run the traditional, yet progressive, school with a program designed to teach both self-reliance and teamwork.

A dancer and teacher, Aine holds the certification of T.C.R.G. in Irish dance, the equivalent of a master's degree. She's been teaching since 2003 at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, where she started their Irish Dance program. McMenemy-Johnson is a performance pro with seven World Irish Dance competitions as a soloist, five in team competition, and she ranked 2nd at the 2000 Belfast World Championships.

"I started the academy to promote the Irish tradition," says Aine, "but Irish dance is much more. It allows dynamic expression in a way that can't be created elsewhere and it's something at which everyone can excel. It's very rewarding to see the dancers gain confidence as they master the steps, develop poise and learn to respect one another."

She emphasizes that Irish dancing isn't just about being Irish. "Our students are boys and girls ranging from four to 21 years of age with a blend of nationalities, religions and ethnicities. It's a great place for children to make friends outside of school, and begin lifelong friendships."

McMenemy-Johnson credits the academy's continued success to their philosophy of excellence and inclusion. "Some of our students want to compete at the world championships, and others simply want to learn to dance and stay fit. Whatever your goal, we'll take you there, and you'll have fun along the way. That approach, coupled with supportive parents, has been a hit," she explains.

Part of that support is in turning out to cheer on the dancers when they are in a feis (pronounced "fesh"), a festival where participants compete in categories, going from beginner to open championship. In days gone by, Irish dancers would just wear their "Sunday Best" and curl their hair for performances. Today the dancers wear beautiful wigs and each school selects colors and designs its own original costume to represent them, like a sports uniform that distinguishes a team.

The McMenamin Academy competes all over the world. In February, they placed 16th in the All-Ireland Championships in the senior Ladies Division. They've also performed for President George W. Bush, Archbishop Timothy Dolan, and other dignitaries, as well as at weddings, special occasions and corporate events.

Looking to the future, the McMenamin Academy is already starting enrollment for their new Mequon location, scheduled to open in late spring. "But don't worry," says Aine, "we're not leaving Shorewood. I'd miss walking to work."