

Storied San Francisco dance school owes its existence to a feisty wife whose legacy is a dance â??familyâ?• of 70 years

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The trajectory of Micky Powellâ??s career path was lovingly set over 40 years ago by her mother, a professional ballet and Armenian folk dancer. When Ruth Jevarian retired in 1974, she turned her Inner Sunset District school, Star Dance Studio, over to her daughter.

â??It was a natural thing; the studio was in the basement,â?• Powell said. â??From the age of five or six, I was taught by my mother and I started teaching others at age 16.â?•



Mickey Powell said she owes her career to her mother, who started teaching dance in the late â??40s in a hall above of her fatherâ??s Haight Asbury grocery store. (Photos courtesy of Mickey Powell.)

Itâ??s a mentorship thatâ??s being handed down to both family members and students. Powellâ??s daughter, Julie Craig, also teaches and many of the instructors are former students, who started dance classes as early as age five.

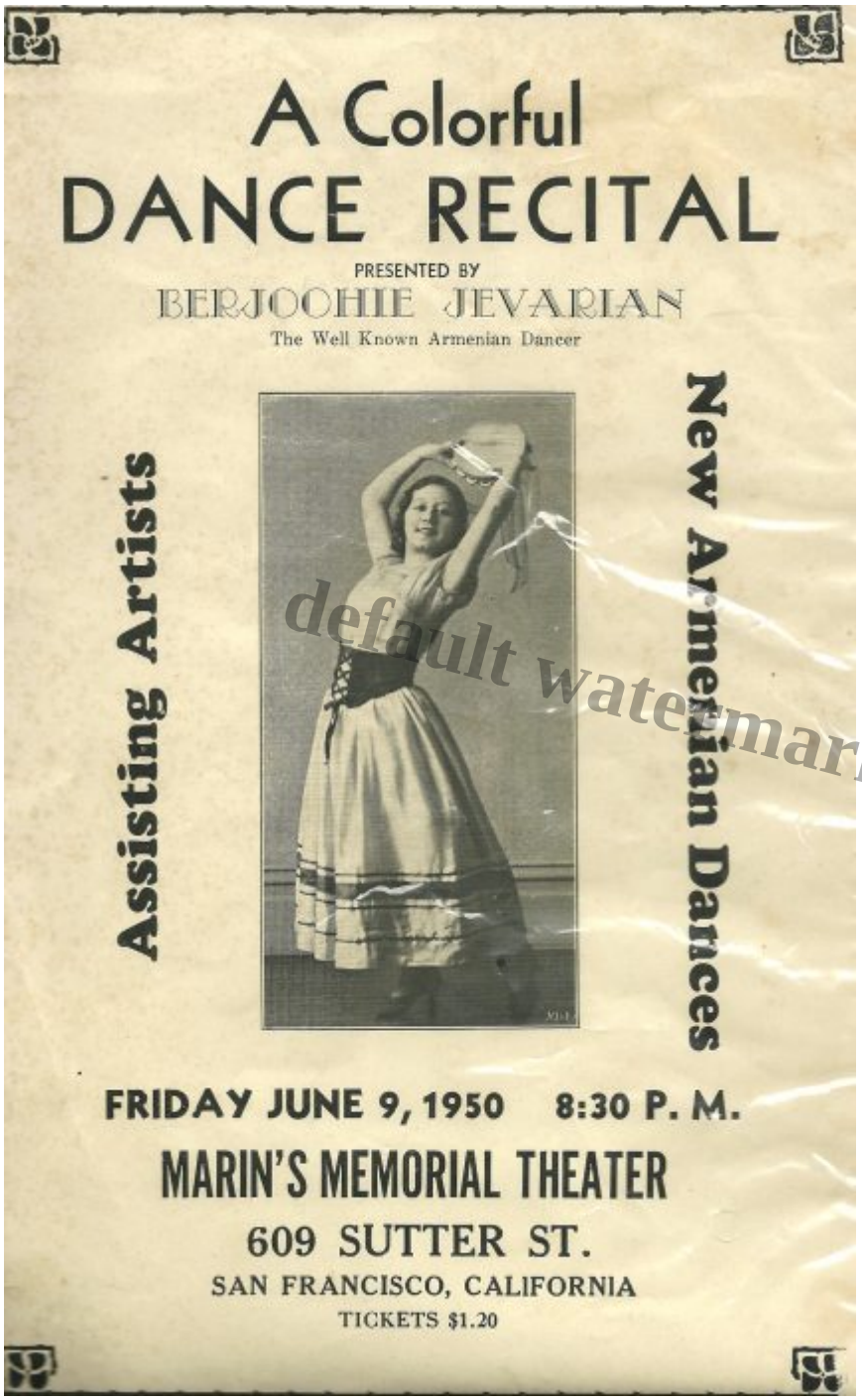


Powell guides one of her senior class students at the barre bar. She no longer teachers childrenâ??s classes after a hiatus caused by knee surgery.

Powell tells the founding story: â??My older brother and I are first-generation, American-born Armenians with an insular, provincial father and an artistic, gifted mother who loved to dance. She had put together her own troupe, had performed at various venues in New York and the Bay Area. When my parents married, my father forbade my mother to continue her career. So, she helped at his Haight Ashbury grocery store. Unbeknownst to him, she let the customers know of her background. They responded with,`Can you teach my children?â?? â?•

Hard to say â??noâ??

She did Ââ?? without her husband noticing â?? in the spacious Armenian Rosdom Hall just one stair flight up from the store, collecting small sums with each session.



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A flier for one of Powellâ??s mother performances.

During this time, the familyâ??s highest priority was to buy a home. One day, her father announced he had the down payment but not the money for closing costs. â??Quietly, my mom went to the bedroom, came back and spread the needed cash across the kitchen table,â?• Powell said, â??and explained the source.â?•

After that, her father became her motherâ??s strongest advocate. When in 1950 the family moved into a home in the Outer Sunset, he built her a professional studio in the basement. She taught ballet, tap, jazz, acrobatics plus Armenian and other ethnic folk dancing for the next 46 years.

In 1996, the family moved home and business to Moraga Street in the Inner Sunset. This year, when Powellâ??s mother passed away, the family dedicated the site to her. â??Altogether, weâ??ve been dancing for over 70 years,â?• said Powell. â??The story speaks of my motherâ??s silent grace, on and off stage, as well as womenâ??s power.â?•



Teacher Monique leads teens in tap dancing.

Through TV, radio and newspaper coverage and good old-fashioned word of mouth, Powellâ??s studio has been informally tagged San Franciscoâ??s premiere dance school, with the longest and most storied history. There have been the celebrity students, the daughter of Danielle Steele; free performances in the community, with emcees like former Mayor Willie Brown and KTVU reporter Bob Roth and comedian Bob Sarlatte. Star Dance Studio still flourishes while other neighborhood dance schools have disappeared.

The school has classes for adults but its focus is children. During any semester over the last 20 years (notwithstanding Covid), about 425 students would be enrolled in any of 40 weekly classes taught by 10 instructors. Choices other than tap and ballet include jazz, contemporary, salsa, hip-hop, combination (creative, tumbling and ballet) and lyrical (similar to ballet â?? done to a song with lyrics).



A class of four-year-olds performing at the Herbst Theatre in 2019. Student recitals are held every June.

â??Itâ??s all about teaching and loving the children,â?• said Powell. â??They are given discipline and boundaries sometimes for the first time. Parents thank me and say they now understand rules.â?•

Over the decades, Powell has amassed a clientele that is generational â?? children, their children and grandchildren.

The family business grows

Powell worked other jobs before she came fully onboard with her mother: cashier at her fatherâ??s grocery store, customer service at the phone company; sales at Roos Atkins, a since closed, San Francisco-based menâ??s clothing chain. She got invited to model but her dad put the kibosh on that.

She married in her 20s, kept busy with family and went to college but did not graduate. Nevertheless, when she transitioned into the directorship of the dance studio, she had the acumen to grow the business.



Free community performances were held at the 37th Ave and Ortega St. Farmerâ??s Market, even during Covid closures when outdoor performances were allowed. Powell said she will resume them when she has groups with new choreography.

â??Actually, I did have an epiphany when I took over,â?• she said. â??I remember watching my mother; she was so giving to a fault. When she encountered people who said they could not afford to pay, she would give free lessons. And a lot of that was good but the parts where I thought that she was being taken advantage of, I was determined that I would not fall into that particular habit.â?•

When Covid forced the schoolâ??s closure in March 2020, it shifted to Zoom classes, which didnâ??t work especially well for small children, Powell said. The school re-opened recently, but with only 10 classes.

She hopes to eventually resume the free performances that are her way of giving back to the community. Students have performed at Laguna Honda Hospital and Rehabilitation Center, at a senior center in collaboration with the nonprofit arts organization Bread and Roses and in the past, at the once-annual â??May Dayâ?• celebration at the former Kezar Stadium.

And every year, at the Herbst Theater, recitals graduates (those who have studied for as much as 10 years) give their own choreographed solo performance and receive ribbons with medals reading â??Iâ??m an unstoppable Star dancer.â?•

A senior awakening

Thatâ??s life with her dance family. The rest is devoted to her biological family. She hs three children, four grandsons and one granddaughter. Her husband of over 40 years, Bobby Lynn Powell, passed in 2018.



Backstage in 2018 at the Herbst Theatre for senior recitals are Powellâ??s husband, Bob, Powell, and Tami, one of the Star Dance teachers.

She became a member of SF Village, an organization of older adults who help one another navigate the challenges and opportunities of aging and has volunteered to help with mediation and Tai Chi classes. Itâ??s amplified her appreciation of her own elderhood and that of others.

â??The thought of being a senior one day never occurred to me,â?• she said, â??Yet, here I am at 75. I just gave my first â??seniorâ?? tap dance class. The group of eight ladies was a blast. I had so much fun with them. The oldest is 92. Iâ??m looking forward to next weekâ??s class.

For Powell, biological age has little meaning. She has no plans to retire. â??More important is how old do I feel? Sometimes, Iâ??m 45; sometimes Iâ??m eight years old. I think most of the time I feel Iâ??m in my 60â??s. I rarely feel my biological age.â?•

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