

Before â??Riverdance,â?? Irish dance school owner was learning the steps as soon as she could walk

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â??Riverdance,â?• the phenomenal stage performance of floor-pounding Irish stepdance hit American shores in 1996. But Irish dance had been in Mary Jo Murphy-Feeneyâ??s bones for half a century.

â??My mother taught me to step dance as soon as I could walk,â?• she said. For the Irish, step-dancing has been as much a part of life as the sun rising in the East. In Irelandâ??s Catholic schools, nuns taught step dancingâ??s cousin *ceili*, pronounced â??kay-lee,â?• which is something like American square dancing. Both were learned at home or in private classes.



Mary Jo Murphy-Feeney with Grace, Jamie, Brendan, Delaney, Zell, Rian and Molly, some of her dance students who participated in the recent Western U.S. Region *Oireachtas*, or competition, at the San Francisco Marriott on Nov. 18. (All photos and video by Colin Campbell)



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Both were party fun in family homes, where basement floors were fashioned to accommodate dancing. They were performed at *feisanna* (festivals, picnics and social events). But competitions, from local to global, focus on step dancing. Despite its sharp, rhythmic sounds, step dancing makes her feel â??light as air,â?• Murphy-Feeney said.

Both Murphy-Feeneyâ??s parents danced. So did her sister â?? and now her sisterâ??s granddaughters. Her husband, an Irishman and PG&E employee who passed away in his 50s, did the ceili and step dance. So did her son and two girls â?? in childhood and on into adulthood.

Both her parents are from Cork County, Ireland, but they didnâ??t meet until each had emigrated to the United States. Her father left home at 17, escaping the 1916 rebellion against British rule, and joined an uncle working on a ranch in Bend, Oregon. Her mother, who was caring for her father after her own mother died in her 15th childbirth, came to the U.S. later.

After meeting at the 1939 Worldâ??s Fair at Treasure Island, they married. â??My father had sold his sheep and with the proceeds bought a â??39 Chevy and a new suitâ?• â?? and settled in San Francisco. They eventually bought a house near Stonestown, where she grew up and lives now. Her parents died in 1992.

Helping the nuns

Ceili classes were offered in the Catholic schools Murphy-Feeney attended and she perfected her step dancing in a private class. She taught and performed Irish dance all through school and later, was chosen to take over her private class when the instructor became ill. That was the origin of her own school, Murphy Irish Dancers. Today, classes are held at recreation and park centers in Burlingame, San Mateo and San Carlos, and at the United Irish Cultural Center in San Francisco.

It was the nuns who got her started. She was asked to help fellow fifth-graders struggling with the steps for *ceili*. By the seventh and eighth grades, when the nuns were absent, she was leading the whole

class. â??I was just a natural teacher,â?• she said. â??I loved it.â?•

In high school, St. Johnâ??s Ursuline, she and three other girls â?? they called themselves â??the fabulous fourâ?• â?? took Annie Slatteryâ??s classes in Alameda and performed at old folksâ?? homes and hospitals. They were escorted around and accompanied by well-known local fiddler Paddy Oâ??Regan. Those experiences would cement her path to dance instruction. â??This is where it really began for me,â?• she said.

In 1963, when Slattery became too sick to continue, Murphy-Feeney was appointed by the Gaelic League of San Francisco to take over the class of 15 students. That was the beginning of what would become a family business.

When she started the school, â??I was 20 married, had an 11-month-old babyâ?• and working at Del Monte Foods in San Francisco, a job sheâ??d had since high school.


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Mary Jo Murphy-Feeney watches her students practice before competing in the 2022 Western U.S. Region competition. Dancers vied for spots in next yearâ??s national and world championships. The Western U.S. Region is one of seven in North America set by the Irish Dance Teachers Association of North America.

It was essentially a â??labor of love,â?• as her father called it, for after 15 years she hadnâ??t made any profit. He urged her to get â??a right jobâ?• with good pay, benefits and a pension. So, at 35, she entered San Francisco State University. She graduated magna cum laude, earned a teaching credential then went to work at Sheridan Elementary, which she had attended through fourth grade.

She taught second grade there for 29 years and, as she had while working for Del Monte, offered step dance instruction after work and on weekends.

It started in a basement

Murphy Irish Dancersâ?? first class was held in the basement of another Irish family, one of several in San Francisco who redid their basement floors to enable dancing. Community supporters also kept Irish dancing thriving. John Whooley, founder of Californiaâ??s oldest Irish newspaper, â??The Irish Herald,â?• organized and sponsored step-dancing feisanna in San Francisco.

At 80, Murphy-Feeney is retired from teaching school but not dance. She teaches the beginners and lets her eldest daughter, Patricia Feeney-Conefrey, teach the rest â?? most of school age but sometimes adults â?? create the choreography, make the costumes, train competitors and coach the champions.

But teaching is just half the equation for the owner of an Irish dance school. The other half is traveling to support their dancers in competitions.

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â??In the early days, weâ??d sleep six to a room in Motel 6,â?• she said, â??and that was part of the fun. We always had great times with very little money.â?• The troupe often included her son and two girls. â??Through these excursions, â??my children made friends that became like relatives.â?•

Sheâ??s still accompanying students to regional, national and world championship matches.

At Novemberâ??s Western U.S. regional, Murphy dancers won first place in some categories and in others qualified for the Nationals, in July in Nashville, and the world championship, in April in Montreal.

Murphy Irish Dancers practice before performing in the 2022 Western U.S. Regional *Oireachtas*, on Nov. 18 at the San Francisco Marriott.

Over the years, Murphy Irish Dancers have won more than 90 regional and 10 national championships and have placed in the world competition. They also have been part of the San Francisco Ethnic Dance Festival for the past 10 years and the St. Patrickâ??s Day Parade for 60. They have performed at half-time on the Golden State Warriorsâ?? Irish nights and at pre-game shows for the San Francisco Giants. Those are just the local celebrities theyâ??ve danced for.

â??One of the most memorable events for me and my family was when we performed for Pope John Paul II,â?• Murphy-Feeney said. That was on Sept. 17, 1987, at Candlestick Park. â??When he got out of the Popemobile and was walking, I asked him to touch my childrenâ??s hands and he did.â?• In a less serious moment, the metal curlers in the girlsâ?? hair triggered the stadium alarms.

Murphy Irish Dancers have appeared in commercials for Clorox and Butchart Gardens in Vancouver and Branson, Missouri. They have provided the tapping sounds behind television show previews. And, they were among the San Francisco cultural groups chosen to represent San Francisco in Shanghai,

China, as part of the 2010 San Francisco-Shanghai Sister City exchange.

â??All the mayors were there â?? Jordan, Brown, Lee â?? and we performed with 15 dancers,â?• Murphy-Feeney said. â??One day, we saw some Chinese dancing outside to â??Riverdanceâ?• music and my little grandson went over to them to show them some steps. They were very grateful.â?•

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