

# Maple Flavore



Strategically positioned around the nation's capital, the Maple Academy of Irish Dance capitalizes on the sweet strength of teamwork.



By Patricia McNamara

## From the floors

of The White House to the National Mall, embassies and festivals in between, being an Irish dancer in the Washington D.C. metropolitan area sure has its perks. Just ask those from the Maple Academy of Irish Dance (they've performed at all). But being amongst such a transient population, a location often recognized by military and government-affiliated families as only a temporary home, finding a stable team atmosphere amid the comings and goings of students has the mixings for a dance school disaster. Fortunately for Maple, this isn't the case. Spread across Maryland, Virginia and Washington D.C., there's a coalition of dancers and families all in it for success. And perhaps it's because they are lead by example from a strong husband and wife pairing.

Like many, Bill and Marnie Maple are transplants to the Washington D.C. area. Hailing from Massachusetts, Marnie, a World Championship dancer, took lessons from Maureen Hansen Keohane and Eddie Irwin growing up. Bill, the 1982 North American Senior Men's Champion and World Championship dancer, took from Rita O'Shea and first started a school in the suburbs of Boston in 1983 shortly after receiving his TCRG. The duo relocated to Germany for seven years soon after they married, eventually taking over a folding school of 30 some students near D.C. in 1997 once returning stateside.

"There's always someone there we can count on to bounce ideas off of," says Marnie of working with her husband. Running the school together, they've used their strong mutual background of ceilis and figures to churn out team spirit for over a decade—from a dance drama (the first choreographed after moving back to the U.S.) that took first in the 1999 Nationals and Oireachtas, straight up to today. In the 2010 Southern Region Oireachtas alone, Maple Academy teams won gold in the Girls Under 12 8-Hand Ceili and 15 & Over Figure Choreography.

Photo: Shamrock Photography

“My teachers truly take the time to get to know every student, not only in terms of their dancing, but their personalities as well,” says Sarah Kenny, 15, one of the dancers from the winning senior figure. Past the common factors of age, ability, height and commitment Bill and Marnie examine when forming teams for competitions, their main focus is always on the individual. “We realize children learn differently and we adapt our teaching styles based on the student,” says Bill. Adds Marnie, “Being a teacher can be a balancing act. You are trying to challenge and push the [student] while simultaneously motivating and inspiring them.”

“Mr. Maple tells us, ‘You have to listen to the music. You have to feel the music. You have to *be* the music,’” says 13-year-old Yasmine Zakout. “Focusing on the music helps bring us together as a team.” As do the stimulating speeches Marnie and Bill give on handling the pressures of the stage, emphasizing the importance of hard work and obtaining personal goals.

While Bill and Marnie are the only TCRGs at the school, their hands-on approach allows for others to be valuably involved. Some dancers lend a hand assembling the school’s smaller performances. Classes are predominantly divided by level rather than age,



Rhythm of Ireland Feis 2010.  
1st place Champions Alexa Maple and Megan O’Keefe  
with Bill Maple TCRG. Photo: Donna O’Keefe.



Going for the gold! Members of the winning 15 and Over Figure Choreography at the 2010 Southern Region Oireachtas.  
Photo: Phillip Kenny.

and with students ranging anywhere from age 5 to college, peer-to-peer mentorship is strongly welcomed.

“We have more college dancers now [than ever],” Marnie says of classes, in which some of the older dancers occasionally help out. “It’s nice to see them reach out and guide the younger ones. It brings them all together.”

“When I started dancing, I would get excited when one of the older dancers smiled back at me or made an effort to talk to me,” says Sarah. “I think it’s [now] my responsibility to be outgoing towards the younger dancers at my school.” Leading up to this past Oireachtas, Sarah was given that opportunity, coaching five- and six-year-olds in ceilis. “It’s helpful for dancers to have someone closer to their age working with them. As a little kid, you’re impressionable. I wanted to help make them love and enjoy dancing.”

Bliss is what one makes of any situation. For Bill and Marnie, stressing the note that while competition might be hard, dancing should always be fun, keeps the morale high. “It’s important to enjoy what you are doing and want to do it,” explains Marnie. Which is why they spice things up in class, making it about more than just running steps. Dancers warm up to songs from the hit FOX series *Glee* and learn valuable strengthening and floor work techniques that can be carried

over to their additional hobbies like swimming, cross country and gymnastics.

The bonding and fun extends beyond the classroom, too, which can serve as a warm welcome to the school’s flow of fresh faces. “The best part of being a Maple dancer is the friends I’ve made,” shares Ginny Hoyt-O’Connor, 14, a champion dancer and new member to Maple within the past two years due to a move. “This fall, my team made tie-dye T-shirts and went to *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* together. It doesn’t really matter what we are doing. We [just like] to have a good time.”

It’s learning the balance of being chums with competitors that makes the Maple bond stick. “There’s a strong sense of camaraderie,” says Marnie. “Many compete against one another and maybe one wins and one doesn’t, but they are immediately there to support both.” Adds Bill, “They have wins, they have losses. [But] they know how to [do both] gracefully.” And with the unbreakable poise of true champs, it appears that the state of this union will never weaken—no matter how many familiar faces might move away to be replaced by equally talented feet.

For more info on the Maple Academy of Irish Dance, go to [www.mapleirishdance.com](http://www.mapleirishdance.com)