

The Rankin Record

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Ballroom dancing attracts all ages to growing club

NOLA GIBSON confesses she was shy to dance once upon a time, but now she has gained the confidence and experience to dance her favorite dance, the Tango, along with other members of the Magnolia Ballroom Dancers Association. The group meets once a month at the Agricultural Museum on Lakeland Drive. Staff Writer Steven Richardson talked with Gibson about the association and its dancers.

When and where was this association formed?

The charter members of the organization first met in May of 1991 and adopted a constitution in September of 1991. It is a social events organization that promotes ballroom dancing in the metro area. People from all of the studios go to it. You get a chance to practice your dancing. Sometimes we have workshops where special people come in and do their exhibitions. We have over 120 members. It's usually about 100 people who attend the dances on the second Saturday of every month.

How long have you been a member?

I have been a member for about seven years.

You mentioned that several studios come together at this event?

Yes. Two of them are in Rankin County. They are both on Bierdeman Road. Dance Connection is where I take some of my lessons. They have private and group lessons and a group dance every Thursday night. Sometimes they have around 70 people there.

Do you think ballroom dancing is being revived or has it remained a popular outlet?

Well, some of us have done it whether it was popular or not. But Dancing with the Stars has increased interest. I am amazed what they can get those people to do in a week's time. They make them look great out there. The weeks that they train have to be super intense because it takes normal people years to be able to get out there.

You do find that more women like it than men. Men have some idea that they won't like it. If their wives can get them in there, they often do like it. Couples do it together, and it is really sweet to see them.

Do you require prior experience with ballroom dancing before joining this association?

No, we do not.

What is the age range of participants?



Come Join us Nola K. Gibson gets a cure from a stressful day by taking part in a session of ballroom dancing at either her practice studio, Dance Connection, or with the Magnolia Ballroom Dancers Association. The association has been growing since 1991.

Well, we have a lot of college students. Millsaps has formed a ballroom swing club now. Mississippi State, Ole Miss, and Southern Miss groups come to the dances. It's pretty cool. We also have a man who comes to every dance anywhere, and he is 89. So I would say late teens to 89.

Are there any requirements to join?

It is a \$35 membership fee per year. For that, you get into the dance for \$10. We have workshops that you can get into at reduced rates.

What kind of workshops?

Different dances-the last time we had one on Waltz and one on Rumba.

Which is your favorite?

Tango. I found a quote that I think just says it all. "When it comes to fitness, why walk when you can tango?" You get exercise and listen to great music and you meet all kinds of nice people. Another special thing is that people of all ages dance together.

What is it about ballroom dancing that intrigues its participants?

I think that when you first go, you think, "Well, I can learn this really quickly." What you soon begin to learn is that there is more to it. You start out with just learning basic steps. Soon you are learning techniques, posture, great exercise, and you just get hooked into it and realize you will have to keep learning forever to get really good.

Does it really take forever to get really good?

Well, it depends on how much you might practice or how many lessons a week. But I've been taking lessons nine years, and I am at the silver level. You start out in bronze. Very few people go all the way to gold.

Do you get to take your expertise to other states and compete?

You could if you wanted to. I don't really compete, but some people do. They have advanced competition down on the coast, Mississippi Coast area, every year in December.

You think you would ever do that?

I doubt it. For me, it's fun and relaxation. You can go in there and may be stressed out from your day. But that's gone when you are in there because you have to think about what you are doing. The other thing they say now is that you need to learn new things to keep from getting Alzheimer's. Well, dancing is a lot to learn. But you're having fun while you are doing it, enjoying and being with people. Like I said, the music is wonderful to dance to.

You said you started dancing nine years ago. Where?

I started at In Step Studio, which was in Jackson in The Quarter. But the teacher I have now at Dance Connection was the teacher there. He has a beautiful, big studio over there in Pearl. His name is Mike Day.

What made you want to dance ballroom-style?

I kind of always wanted to, but I had never danced. I was real self-conscious about it. A friend of mine who was doing it just made me go in. I was scared to death the first day. I thought, "You know, I can't do this." But then, I was hooked.

Do you recall yourself growing up, trying out ballroom dancing?

Well, that was a long time ago. We did the Bop in high school. But after that, I never danced again until about nine years ago. Bop is kind of like Swing dancing. We just kind of did it. We did not know formal patterns.

I would assume that the name of the association was derived from the state being the Magnolia State. Is this correct?

Yes. It wasn't supposed to be just for Jackson, because people come from the Coast, Hattiesburg, and other places.

What is a typical dance day at the Ag Museum?

If we have workshops, we do those during the day. The event starts at 8 p.m. We have a play list of all the kinds of music and what dance you do to it. We usually have about two mixers. A mixer is where all of the women line up and all of the men and you just take turns dancing around the floor. People, who don't come with anybody they know, can meet other people.

There is usually an exhibition of either a teacher or an advanced student in the middle of the evening. Then, we get back to general dancing. It lasts from 8 p.m. until 11 p.m.

Why should someone join?

If they love to dance and meet people, get exercise, but get it in a fun way-anyone from around the state or out of state can come. A lot of people get into the dancing clothes, the dresses for the women, and we all buy dancing shoes. It is a kind of little culture of its own.

It's interesting that you say that. Why do you consider it a culture?

When someone calls my house, and I am not there, they tell my son, "I'm from the dance community." He thinks that's so funny, but that's what we are. We're other things, too, but we are connected. We would love for people to join and learn.

Does the association have any big plans coming up?

We have a big dance with a band for National Ballroom Dancing Month in September. A lot of times we do exhibitions out at the mall to try to get more people interested in ballroom dancing.

We've even done some dancing for the plays at New Stage, if it's something about dancing. We do it in the Hewes Room before the show when people are getting wine and coffee. People always enjoy watching it.

Is there a certain personality type that enjoys dancing?

Usually pretty social people who like to talk to people because when you're dancing with somebody, you usually visit with them.

I found another quote about dancing that would like to share. "You're never too old to dance! You may not want to kick you heels up like a teenager, but dancing is wonderful exercise, a great way to socialize, and a healthy way to challenge yourself physically." (Dr. Weil on Healthy Aging) "It doesn't matter how old you are, just so long as you are willing to dance!"

I have a good friend who has MS and lives in Rankin County. She takes dancing, and it has helped her with her balance.

Can people just come and watch the dancing?

Sure, but they would have to pay. For Magnolia, they would pay \$15 for the guest fee. But they would have you out there trying to dance. You can't just sit down. You would want to dance, because it's fun.

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