

One Shoe Can Change Your Life

Giving Adults a Chance: Culkin School encourages dancers of all ages

by Christy Dorrity

The adults who attend the Culkin School of Traditional Irish Dance refer to themselves as a part of "Family Culkin". The heritage began in 1995 when Sean Culkin and a group of other adult dancers met together weekly to share their love of Irish culture. A few years later the Culkin School opened its doors to children and adults. Today the school has more than 400 students of all ages in the Washington D.C. area. After fourteen years, the Culkin School continues to impart a legacy for all of their dancers to excel without boundaries, no matter what their age.



The Culkin adult ladies ceili teams in Nashville at the Gaylord Opryland.
Photo: Culkin School.



"Backstage" at the Kennedy Center before a performance on the Millennium Stage.
(L to R) Melissa de Beer, Debbie Kaplan, Catie LaRocca, Bonnie Zuckerman, Maureen Matthews Wentworth, Tammy Larson, Jessica Rosewag Byrne, Ellen Burns, Pam Len, Alexandra Whyte and Megan Howard TCRG.
Photo: Culkin School.



Sean Culkin TCRG emceeing a performance at the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.
Photo: Eric Jensen.

The Culkin adults are one of the most successful competitive adult teams in the country, having held 17 regional championship titles in the last seven years. In 2009, the Culkin adults won the Adults Ladies Ceili competition at the North American National Irish Dancing Championships held in Nashville, Tennessee. In 2010, the team competed and placed in the All Ireland Championships in Killarney, Ireland. In addition to competitions, the Culkin adults perform throughout the Baltimore and Washington, D.C. areas. They have appeared at many regional festivals, including the Potomac Celtic Festival, the Maryland Renaissance Festival and the Baltimore Irish Festival.

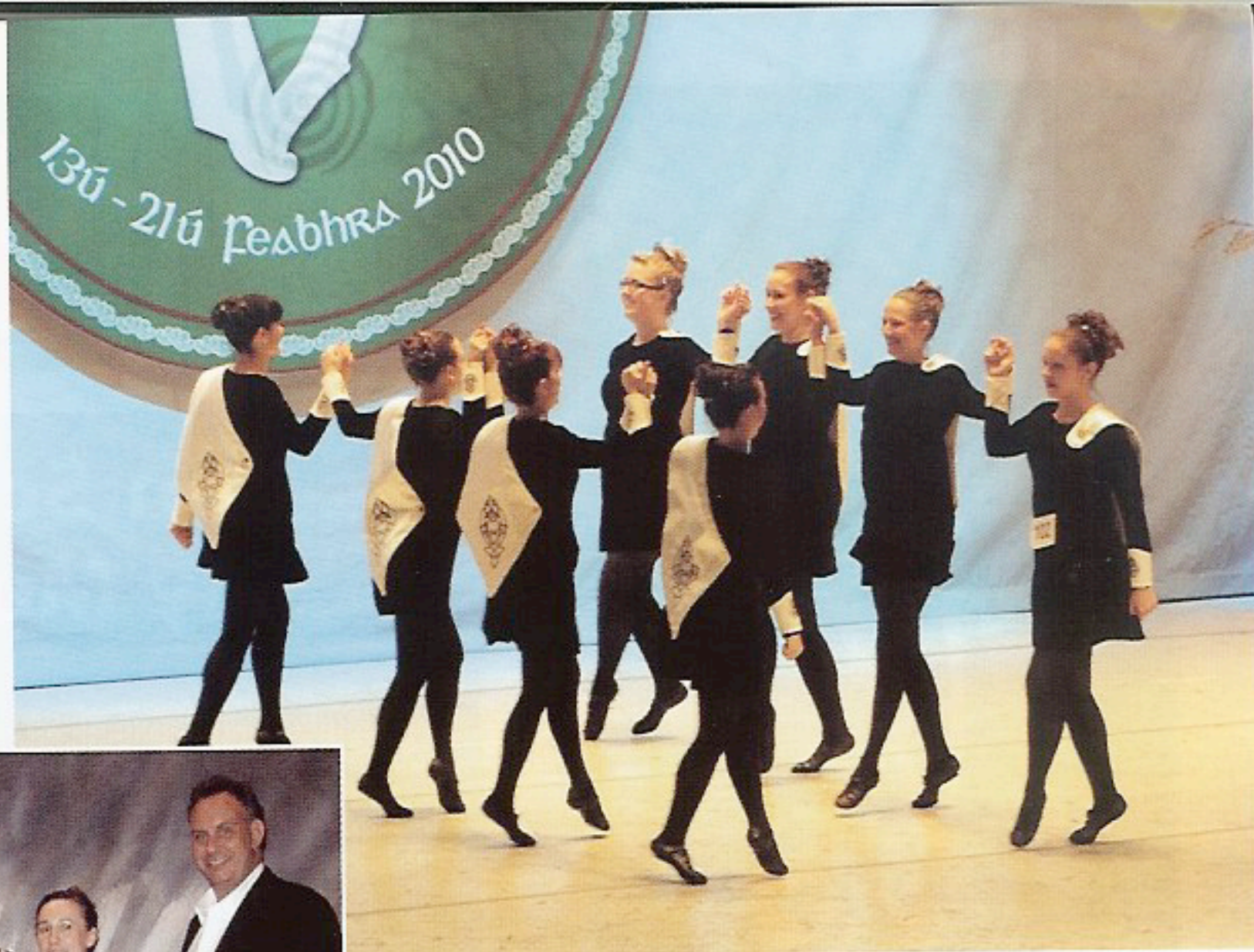
In a sport where adult programs aren't always available and sometimes frowned upon, the Culkin School is forging ahead. Megan Howard, TCRG and adult teacher at Culkin, was one of the original group that danced with Sean before the school's inception. "I love teaching adults because they are really committed to dancing," says Howard. The school's artistic director, Nicki Sack Bayhurst, TCRG, ADCRG, says, "Our adults have been very successful. [They have] given us the confidence to start a figures program for our children." Megan Moloney, TMRF, began dancing as an adult and now coaches the adult team figure classes. She believes that the adult program brings dancers to the school. Moloney

says, "I'd like to think that our reputation as an adult-friendly school is one of the reasons we continue to attract dancers."

Because many of the teachers at Culkin School began dancing as adults, they inspire and encourage other adult dancers to set their goals high. Alexandra Whyte, an adult student, finds strength in having teachers who danced as adults. "They are models of how well one can dance if one puts enough time into it," Whyte says. "It makes me feel that certain goals are more attainable." Dancer Jessica Rosewag agrees, "Because they started dancing as adults they understand the different obstacles that adult dancers have with work and other adult responsibilities." Moloney attributes her ambition of teaching Irish dance to her first teacher, Caterina Earle. "Knowing that Caterina began as an adult and earned her TCRG helped me realize it was possible," says Moloney.

Adult dancer Lynn Haslbeck credits Sean Culkin, TCRG and director of the Culkin School for the school's atmosphere of inclusion for all dancers. "He provides us all, children and adults, with marvelous opportunities to dance and to compete," Haslbeck says. "[Sean] is very supportive of every level of dancer."

The Culkin adults perform the Eight Hand Jig at the 2010 All Irelands in Killarney. Photo: Culkin School.



The 2009 North American Adult Ladies Ceili Champions (L to R) Front: KC Flaberty, Debbie Kaplan. Middle: Melissa de Beer, Tammy Larson, Amy Takeuchi-Wanlass. Back: Megan Moloney TMR, Alexandra Whyte, Julie Dimick, Erin Wilk, Sean Culkin TCRG. Photo: Culkin School.

Sean Culkin believes that every dancer should have a chance to succeed, no matter their age. He says, "If someone comes to me and they have the talent, then they are moved on. I really do not care if they are adults or not." Culkin remembers Jenny O'Connell, a dancer who came to the school at 20 years of age. She went on to win the Southern Region Oireachtas, place at Nationals and then danced with Riverdance for three years. Culkin says, "The first Irish dance teacher she had would not let her into a step dance class."

The Culkin Adults support all aspects of the school, from classes and volunteering, to competitions and performances. "Adult dancers bring a unique, wonderful quality to a dance school," Howard says. "Whenever we have a performance that includes our kids and adults dancing together, it really showcases what Irish dance is about — celebrating the culture and the love of the dance form."

"My goal for the school is to preserve the unique tradition of Irish music and dance and pass it on to new generations of dancers," Sean Culkin says. There is no doubt that his dream includes dancers of all ages who find their place in "Family Culkin".



Culkin adults perform Trip to the Cottage at the F. Scott Fitzgerald Theatre in Rockville, Maryland. Photo: Culkin School.

Christy Dorrity is an adult Irish dancer and freelance writer. Her articles have appeared in Diddly Magazine. When she is not dancing, you can find Christy hard at work on a young adult novel. You can find her online at www.christydorrity.com, on twitter([twitter/gonefeising](https://twitter.com/gonefeising)) and on facebook (facebook.com, keyword gonefeising).