

The Dancing Queen

Joanne Reagan celebrates 50 years of creating movers and shakers

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Joanne Reagan still dances about four hours a day, four days a week. “It’s not as easy to pull it out of myself as it used to be,” admits the 70-year-old owner of Joanne Reagan Dance Studios, celebrating its 50th year in business. But age is just a number at JRD, where Joanne’s student roster includes a 72-year-old tap-and-ballet enthusiast and an 18-month-old child who’s “working on her creative movement.” These are just two of the 5,000 people who’ve benefited from Joanne’s tutelage over the last five decades, some of them making it all the way to The Great White Way (or Broadway, for those not in the biz).

Joanne, a Cape May native, has performed with the likes of dance legends Gregory Hines and Luigi, and she’s honed her craft in Boston, Philadelphia, New York and Chicago. We chatted with her about what she’s learned, what she’s looking forward to, and what still gets her toes tapping...

Does it feel like 50 years? Not usually. We live in the moment. But then I see a photo or other memory from when we first started and I’m reminded: Oh yeah... it HAS been a long time.

Was teaching always the dream? I started dancing when I was eight with a wonderful instructor named Gerry Barber, whose Uncle Ludy wrote “On the Way to Cape May.” She was my inspiration. We trained in her little garage on Winona Avenue. Have you heard of the variety TV show, *Arthur Godfrey’s Talent Scouts*? I used to think if I put on shows in my garage, a talent scout might drive down Pittsburgh Avenue and see me.

You’ve trained a lot of places, including University of the Arts in Philadelphia and Northwestern in Chicago. And you could teach dance anywhere. Why did you ultimately decide to return to your roots and open a studio in Cape May? Ms Gerry was fabulous, and I wanted to carry that on. I also wanted to develop more of a cultural awareness through dance and the performing arts here in Cape May County, because I felt as a youngster there needed to be more of that. I



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ventured out of the area to get it, and I wanted to afford that to other people.

How has your business changed in 50 years? Dance hasn't changed. People have changed. One of the challenging things today is instilling the need to have to work for something. In dance, there's no such thing as instant gratification. Sometimes, students are like, "I want to be able to do that." Well, you're not going to be able to do that until you master this. As an upside, the dance world has continued to proliferate. I remember so many years ago, people said tap dancing was a dying art. And there was a point in time when it felt in remission, so to speak. But now? We're not in remission at all. Any of it.

What does dance do for a kid, besides the exercise component? It develops your mind and your soul. Those endorphins and that serotonin kick in when you move, and when you marry that with music and a concept... it is just such a glorification of life. It adds the color. It develops that creativity. That's what life is — it's a creation. And so having dance in your life adds to that creation, so you're never stagnant.

Who's your most famous student? There have probably been 150 kids over the years who've done some professional work. DeAndre Wolf was on Broadway in *Riverdance*, and he toured 21 countries. He started with me at three years old, and for his first solo, I had to bribe him onto stage with candy. Hans Crown was in *Peter Pan* with Sandy Duncan. Michelle Nigalin was in *Miss Saigon*. Several have been in *Annie* on Broadway. We've had Disney dancers, Radio City Rockettes and Nickelodeon

performers.

Your daughter, Anne Reagan, is a very accomplished dancer in her own right. How long have you worked together, and what's that like? About 18 years. Sometimes it's very good! Sometimes, it's probably frustrating on both sides of the fence. But she was born and raised in this studio. She's worked one-on-one with Debbie Reynolds in *That's Entertainment Live*; she was one of the last Copa Girls at the Sands, home of the original Rat Pack; and she was line captain for *Legends in Concert* in Las Vegas. She's been on *Oprah* and *E! Entertainment*. She's done much more than I could say here.

Tell me about the movie you worked on together. In 2008 they shot a film in Cape May County called *Standing Ovation* that was in theaters in 2010, and Anne and I were choreographers. James Brolin was the executive producer, so he was there the day we shot this one big scene. The piece was 10 minutes, but we were there nine hours. That's the thing about film — you can shoot, and shoot and shoot until it's right, and if there's a problem on set, it's not like the audience is sitting there waiting for you. I was an extra once in the movie *Blow Out* in Philadelphia with John Travolta. I had to wear a fur coat in July and be a bystander as he came barreling out of City Hall down Market Street.

Give me your best “the show must go on” moment. Well, it must. There's no two ways about it. I remember once there was an electrical problem between act one and act two, and the theater had been evacuated. I was

like, “You cannot do this.” It did end up getting fixed. That's the great thing about live theater. You have to deal with the situation right then and there.

When dance becomes the way you make your living, is it difficult to maintain passion for it? You have to separate it. Something that's difficult sometimes as an artist is to be an administrator and a business person. It doesn't always mix. You have to make the division. My daughter is pretty good at helping me with that.

Is dance something everyone can learn to do if they work hard enough, or is it an innate skill? We all have it innately. If you're going to take it — raw and bare — we're all born with it. It's the beat of life. But as far as being able to stay with the training to become a professional, you have to have that drive.

Are you training your dancers to compete? We don't do competitions, but I have a performance company. This allows students with a desire or a need to perform to do so for a live audience at something other than a spring dance recital. We've performed in the local Christmas and Halloween parades, the Mummer's Parade in Philadelphia, at Disney World, and at two pre-season openers in the Phillies stadium. The astroturf was so hot at that last one, it burned through our shoes.

So what do you hope the next 50 years will bring? That's kind of hard to say! Right now, I'm hoping to continue to inspire kids to feel good about themselves. I want them to leave the studio saying, “Wow, that was great.” That will make for sunshine every day.

