




Lee-Byrne Academy of Irish Dance

IDM meets Michelle Lee ADCRG and Rachel Byrne TCRG, founders of the Lee-Byrne Academy, to discover the success that can be achieved by two sisters with a shared passion.

School profile: Established by Michelle Lee ADCRG in 1990 as the Lee School of ID. In 2005, Rachel Byrne TCRG joined and it became the Lee-Byrne Academy.

Number of students: It varies but our classes are generally small, providing students with more attention.

Locations: Lucan and Blanchardstown areas of Dublin.

 **What does it take** to run a hugely successful Irish dance school that mixes the family ethos with a real drive for success stories? IDM spoke to Michelle Lee and Rachel Byrne to find out, and caught up with a few of their dedicated pupils on the way to tell us about their beloved teachers and school:

About the teachers

Sisters Rachel and Michelle both started dancing at a very young age. Michelle qualified as a teacher in 1990 and as an adjudicator in 2000 and has one daughter Miriam age 16 who is a champion dancer. Rachel qualified as a dance teacher in 2005. Both Michelle and Rachel had always wanted to be teachers and in 1994, Rachel joined Riverdance and was one of the original troupe members, travelling the world for eight years with the show. On her return she took her TCRG exams and the school name was changed to the Lee-Byrne Academy. Rachel is also a qualified Montessori school teacher and operates her own Montessori School teaching children age three to five years and has one son Aaron who is 18 months old. The sisters are both past pupils of the Crean School of Irish Dancing in Dublin.

About the school

The school is a very competitive school with a high level of achievement at major championships. Rachel told IDM: "Immediately after our premier event the All Ireland and International Championships, the work begins again for the next All Ireland and International Championships." Practice and fitness workshops also continue during the summer months. Their champion dancers take five or six classes a week coming up to majors and work very hard to bring home titles. "We regularly make trips to Disneyland® Paris and perform as part of the Disney Magic Music Days programme in the Disneyland® park" says Rachel. Since 2006 the school has been invited every year to perform as special guests for the St Patrick's Day festival in the Disneyland® park. 24 of the Academy's top dancers perform at this fantastic



festival for which rehearsals are due to begin shortly for their fifth trip in 2010. They also perform regularly at weddings, corporate events etc.

“Thankfully we are a very close knit school and there is great camaraderie and sense of community amongst all our pupils” Michelle explained to IDM. Our motto is “you don’t just win for yourself; you win for your school.” The parents have a huge involvement in the organisation of trips, fundraising, dressmaking etc and the sisters said they would be lost without them. During a typical show rehearsal day, while Rachel and Michelle are teaching, there will be dress making and costume fitting going on at the end of the hall. One of the mums of two of their dancers brings along her sewing machine to rehearsals. “All we have to do is say what colour we would like a particular dance routine to be and the rest is left to Mary Bridget Mullins and her team of helpers!” explains Michelle. “If you can’t sew, then you make the tea to keep us going for the day!”

Fundraising events

One of the Academy’s best fundraising events was held last December. “We ran a ‘Jigs and Eejits’ Night. (our version of RTE’s Celebrity Jigs n Reels)” recalls Rachel. “The mums and dads had two weeks to learn a short dance routine choreographed by

their son or daughter. Each couple were awarded points for entertainment value, costumes and all routines had to have four particular Irish dance movements in it.” The three judges were a former Riverdancer Sabrina Carty Halliwell, Dublin’s 98fm DJ Steven Cooper and one of our own An Comhdhail ADCRG’s Mr Seamus Murray. Rachel fondly remembers “it was a very

“We love that Irish dancing can build a child’s confidence.”

entertaining and enjoyable night. Every year at Halloween we have a fundraising fancy dress céilí. At other times we have held quiz nights and fashion shows.”

Achievements

“Our top achievement would be winning 17 All Ireland and International Championship titles since 2002, and 61 provincial and numerous Dublin titles,” Michelle told IDM.

“On an equal par with this would performing in Disneyland® Paris as special guests for the past four years in at their St Patricks Day celebrations and having been

invited again to perform in 2010.”

Another fantastic achievement for the Academy was when pupil Zara Curtis became female principle dancer with Riverdance in 2004 after just a few months with the show. Zara is also their first pupil to receive her TCRG diploma.

Another claim to fame was when Rachel performed as a dance teacher on RTE’s Celebrity Jig’s and Reels in 2007 with celebrity chef Kevin Dundon and they made it to the semi finals.

Finally on a more personal level for Rachel and Michelle, “our most important achievement is being given the talent to teach Irish dancing and nurture children from a very young age to follow their dreams and ambitions and continue to keep our Irish culture alive.”

The Lee-Byrne dancers love the glitz and glamour of Irish dancing and according to their teachers, are “always trying new trends and wanting to be the first out in something different.”

The sisters favourite piece of advise for their dancers is “hard work = success”.

“It is very rewarding to see a pupil master a new step that they have been working on,” Michelle explains. “We love that Irish dancing can build a child’s confidence. We are also there for them at times when their confidence may be knocked, for example an injury before a



Zara Curtis performing in Celtic Thunder



RTEs Jigs n Reels full cast Teachers and celebrities 2007



RTEs Jigs n Reels teachers Nicola Byrne Paula Goulding Rachel Byrne and Dearbhla Lennon 2007

major championship or a disappointing result.”

Dream Irish day:

When IDM asked the pupils from the Lee-Byrne Academy what their dream Irish dancing day would be, they replied:

1. Standing on the number one podium at the All Ireland and International Championships
2. Dancing in front of Disneyland® Paris’s Sleeping Beauty Castle on the castle stage and looking down Main Street USA at the crowds.

What the pupils say:

“We like to think of the Lee-Byrne Academy under the “5 F’s”, Family, Friendship, Fitness, Fun and Fab!! In Solo, Team and Show Dancing, Michelle and Rachel lead us inspirationally.” **Grace and Conn Power, 18 and 14**

“Dancing with the Lee-Byrne Academy is challenging, rewarding, fun & exciting. There is a great balance between competition & show work, with positive encouragement from our amazing teachers.” **Jeanette O Meara, 14**

“The Lee-Byrne Academy is an amazing

Irish dance school. The experience we get is incredible and I will remember it for the rest of my life!” **Kellie Anne Purtill, 15**

“I have been dancing for the Lee-Byrne Academy for 14 years. It is a great benefit to have my mum and aunt as my dance teachers because they are always there for advice. They give us many opportunities to travel and see the world and always have us well prepared for major championships. I hope to follow in their footsteps and teach alongside them in the future.”

Miriam Lee, 16

“I love attending the Academy because although it’s hard work, it’s fun spending so much time with all my pals. These pals are friends for life!” **Zoe Talbot, 13**

Looking to the future:

Rachel and Michelle have recently established their own production company, M & R Dance Events Ltd.

M & R Dance Events in conjunction with Take us 2 the Magic and Disneyland Paris are hosting the first ever European Celtic Irish Dancing Festival in the Disneyland® park from 15th to 18th October 2010. The big launch will be very soon and they are very excited that IDM will be the official

media partner for this event.

Star stories:

Following her success in Riverdance, Zara Curtis was asked to become the principle dance soloist for the US billboard topping show ‘Celtic Thunder’ which is currently touring in the USA and Canada.

“We also have another pupil in Riverdance, Deirdre Dowling, and three other pupils, Grace Power, Rachel Nugent and Emer Dowling successfully auditioned and are currently waiting to be placed in one of the troupes” says Rachel.

Six year old Steven O Brien is another success story for the sisters: “Steven commenced dancing when he was almost five years old. We knew from his first lesson that he was a natural. He mastered his basic reel in the first lesson and after six months had gone from beginners grade into opens. He recently won his first open championship under six and recently performed in our home town at two big events. His modern (Michael Flatley style) number amazed the audience! Steven most definitely has star quality.” **IDM**

Does your school deserve to be in IDM?

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