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Longtime Villa Park dancer, teacher's legacy lives on in Memories

Villa Park, IL

After World War II ended and the young men came home to Villa Park, they could be found on any given night at the Garrett Dance Studio, on the corner of Ardmore Avenue and Central Boulevard, where the studio's owner offered them free ballroom dance classes and hosted parties.

Marion Garrett Welch took over the studio following her mother's retirement in 1947. Before that, Welch enjoyed a career of dancing professionally. She taught hundreds of young dancers who passed through the studio's doors. Some became professionals, some became teachers and some fell in love. When she lived and worked in Villa Park, Welch was known as Marion Harvey. After her second marriage in 1990, to William Welch, she changed her name.

"Growing up, so many people would talk about how their parents met at that studio," said Daryl Johnson, Welch's daughter.

Welch passed away April 14 in St. Peters, Mo., where she lived near her daughter. She was 83, and during her life, she touched the lives of many dancers.

Born in Cincinnati, the daughter of a dance teacher, Welch moved to Lombard with her family in 1931, where the studio was first located. It was moved in 1937 to the Villa Park post office before settling at 318 S. Ardmore Ave. in 1941. As a young woman, Welch launched her dancing career with the Dorothy Hilde Dancers at the Chicago Theater. She later danced with the Schubert's Operetta Revivals and the Chicago Opera Company Ballet Troupe with Ruth Page at the Chicago Civic Opera House.

When she completed her professional career, Welch returned to the same place she learned to dance and began teaching ballet, tap, jazz and ballroom dancing.

"She taught such a quality of dance that people came from far and wide to take her class," Johnson said. "She had people from all different areas coming to take her lessons."

Influenced by their mother, Johnson and her brother, Mark Harvey, each began dancing when they were 4 and spent time performing with the DuPage Ballet Company, along with other professional groups and productions. Johnson took over the Garrett-Harvey Dance Studio in the 1980s, and taught for 35 years before retiring. Harvey lives in Downers Grove and still teaches ballroom dancing classes through the Hinsdale Park District.

"A lot of stuff came through Chicago during our years of growing up and we often had the opportunity to see that," Harvey said.

They have memories of many Sunday afternoons at the Civic Opera House, with their mother, seeing different productions. Having performed there herself, Welch was comfortable leading them into areas where the other patrons didn't have access, Johnson said.

"It was pretty much our whole life," she said. "Dance was always part of our conversations, always part of our activities."

Welch produced many professional dancers, and when they learned everything she could teach them, she would guide them toward other studios and opportunities where the dancers could further hone their skills. At the same time, she produced many teachers, including her own daughter. Today, Johnson's oldest daughter, Janel Scott, is continuing the family legacy and runs her own studio in Nebraska.

Johnson and Harvey said their mother maintained contact with a more than three generations of former students. Johnson took over the day-to-day operations at the studio around 1980 for a time, and Welch stayed on to teach until the late 1980s. In retirement, she left Villa Park for Arizona before joining Johnson in Missouri, where she passed away.

Johnson and Harvey remember their mother as someone who walked around the house singing show tunes, who saw her old dance partners on televised musicals and on Broadway, as someone who carried her love of dance with her where ever she went.

"It was just the way she talked, the way she moved," Harvey said. "The women, the young girls she taught, she helped build a lot of self esteem. It was a certain grace that you carried with you, that you might not even notice."