

Business

A dance school and a place to go dancing

With a loyal following, Ellen Seelen's U.S. Dance Club nears its 30th anniversary on New Britain Avenue

by Doug Maine

Ellen Seelen, the owner and dance teacher at the U.S. Dance Club, is a believer in the virtues of dancing and living proof of its ability to keep people youthful and active.

Despite having suffered torn cartilage and other injuries over the years, she's kept moving and believes dancing is the best thing, especially for people with infirmities such as arthritis.

"It exercises your brain as well as your body — and every part of your body," said Ms. Seelen, who is 72. "It's terrific, it does everything for you."

"With dancing, you do everything at once," she said. It's a sport and it's social and you don't need special equipment like skates. "It's you and the music ... they should teach this in school."

Her business and her passion, the U.S. Dance Club, is not just a place to learn how to dance. With its 3,500-square-foot dance floor, it's also a place to spend a night out dancing.

Modeled after dance schools in New York that always had dancing, "the idea is to take a class and then dance," Ms. Seelen said.

The problem with taking lessons at most other dance schools or in adult education classes is that after the hour-long class, students don't have the chance to practice, she said.

With regularly scheduled dance parties that sometimes include dinner and a show by virtuoso dancers, Ms. Seelen is also something of a social director, a role she's played in previous professional lives, working on cruise ships and at resorts.

Students come for lessons, then stay for the dancing, forming friendships with other students and dancers. Some, like Rocky Hill residents Andy and Shirley Rastallis, have been coming to the dance club for more than two decades.

"We started dancing about 25 years ago. Our kids were all grown up and out of the house and we wanted to do something, so we tried ballroom dancing," Mr. Rastallis said.

"Then, as we continued our lessons, we got into a group. At one time there were probably a dozen people in the group. And we continue to take group lessons, primarily reviewing step patterns we've learned over the years."

The Rastallises also appreciate the size and quality of the dance floor.

"That's very important when it comes to quality ballroom dancing and Ellen has always been very accommodating as to what you want to do, what kind of lessons you want to take," he said.

The club is "our primary location for both lessons and social dancing," he added. With the exception of occasional weddings or church functions, "when we say we're going to go dancing, that's where we're going to go."

Students pay \$10 to dance the night away and there are no dues to pay or contracts that students must sign, Ms. Seelen said, adding that students can save a little money by taking individual lessons.

The hot dances right now (are) the salsa, the tango, the nightclub two-step," she said.

A devoted following

Asked about Ms. Seelen, Mary Shapiro, who comes all the way from Guilford for dance lessons with her husband Jeff, said "she's fabulous."

"We've taken lessons other places," Mr. Shapiro said during a pause in their salsa lesson. "There are places that are closer, but there's nobody that compares to her, that combination of talent and niceness."

Mrs. Shapiro added "Ellen's incredibly patient and a great dancer and very motivating. We learned more from her in five lessons that we did from someone else in a year and a half."

Previously, they'd learned the merengue and swing dancing

"We learned the basics and we wanted to improve, learn new dances," he said.

It's just for fun; they're not interested in competing, but they are getting ready for a Caribbean cruise.

"You'd like to be able to get out there and have fun with people from the area."

One of Ms. Seelen's former students, Matt Murray of Wethersfield, has been a full-time dance teacher since 2002. He had never danced before taking his first lessons at the U.S. Dance Club in 1986.

"Once I got involved in this, I knew I wanted to learn more about dancing," he said.

It didn't hurt that everyone in the local dance studio was always friendly.

Ms. Seelen "has such a wide background in her dancing. She has lots of information," he said. "Traveling competing pros have stopped in, bringing a lot of talent and knowledge into the studio."

Now, like his first teacher, Mr. Murray takes young students to pro-am dance competitions, in which he, the professional, dances with the amateur, his student.

Both also teach adult education courses in area towns and "we've done shows for retirement homes and senior citizen groups, getting them involved as well, not just watching," he said.

Once he started dancing, he noticed that his posture improved and he felt taller. "It takes an investment of time and you get rewarded with a lot of fun," he said.

"I was a little self-conscious when I started dancing, but then I figured that's what you do," he said. "When you're in the ballroom and other people are dancing, that's what you do."

Mr. Murray noted that there is a structure to the way dances are taught, a syllabus that the better teachers follow. So while a dance like the cha-cha-cha may look simple, there are numerous steps and patterns to learn.

In the world of competitive dancing, there are even syllabus competitions in which dancers try to outdo one another dancing just the basic steps. That's worlds away from the gold and silver competitions, for which dancer partners develop their own routines, such as you might see on "Dancing with the Stars."

"You have to learn your music," Ms. Seelen said. "I've taught people that are blind, that are deaf, that have wooden legs. I even taught one guy who had polio ... lot of the teachers do not know their music."

From a musical family

"I was born in New Jersey and I was a child in Philadelphia," Ms. Seelen said.

"My mother was a music teacher and my grandfather was a conductor in Russia; he conducted the orchestra in St. Petersburg" and had been an associate of the great composer Sergei Rachmaninoff.



U.S. Dance Club owner and dance teacher Ellen Seelen (center) demonstrates some salsa dance moves to Mary Shapiro as her husband Jeff watches. — Photo by Doug Maine



Ellen Seelen is suspended in the air as she and fellow dance teacher Matt Murray strike a pose in the ballroom at the U.S. Dance Club.

— Photo by Doug Maine

"I played the piano and my grandfather would come and holler at me and stomp his feet to keep (me) in time," she recalled, adding that it must have helped her develop her sense of rhythm.

She studied business and worked in offices.

"Then I went to Arthur Murray's and started training with them and then I started teaching," she said.

Soon she was going around putting on shows with her fellow dance teachers and taught at various times for Arthur Murray Dance Studios and Fred Astaire Dance Studios. She gave people dance lessons in their homes and then was hired to work on a cruise ship, entertaining and teaching people to dance.

The walls of her dance studio are lined with framed photos and newspaper clippings about the dancers she's taught who've gone on to win dance championships.

Then there are the photos of the show business giants she's known and worked with, performing and creating routines for stars like Jerry Lewis and Jackie Mason, opening for Frank Sinatra.

She points out a photo of Steve, who met his girlfriend while taking dancing lessons.

There are wedding photos, sent by couples grateful for her help preparing for the first dance on their big day.

There's a photo of the late actor/comedian Jan Murray and his family. When she was living on Long Island, she taught them to dance for their son's bar mitzvah, which she attended, sitting at a table with entertainers Alan King, Jack Carter, Sid Caesar and the 1950s TV star Dagmar.

That was when she was married and living in New York.

"We were working on the cruise ships, we lived in New York, on Long Island. He was an engineer and all of a sudden there was no more work," she said.

They relocated to Connecticut and she started teaching dance in a variety of locations.

"Our first class was at Century Hills, 20 people, and it got too small, and then the American Legion, and it got too small and then at Indian Hill Country Club in Newington," she said.

Finally, they leased the space at 38 New Britain Avenue, but it took time to get the building ready. After the carpenter they hired quit after a couple of days, Ms. Seelen, her then-husband and two sons installed the dance floor themselves.

"We got in here in 1980. It will be 30 years starting in January," she said.

Drawing dances from near and far

"People come from all over the place to dance here," finding the club listed on the web and stopping in while they're visiting from California or Rhode Island, or traveling between Boston and New York, Ms. Seelen said.

Her oldest son, an engineer, danced competitively with his girlfriend and won several competitions.

Her younger son, Barry Seelen, is a respected musician who lives in Texas. A keyboardist who plays blues, jazz and jam band music, he's toured and/or recorded with performers such as Greg Piccolo, Mighty Sam McLain, Chris Tofield and Matt "Guitar" Murphy.

At the USDC, there are classes or lessons being given just about every night of the week. A group of advanced dancers comes for classes on Monday nights. That includes Mr. and Mrs. Rastallis, who have faithfully gone for weekly dance lessons "for years and years" and attend social dances two or three times a month.

"It's just a nice social activity. We find that people who ballroom dance socially are very nice to be with. It's definitely not a barroom type of atmosphere. It's just a very nice group of people," Mr. Rastallis said.

Dancing is therapeutic, he added.

"I find it mentally challenging because of trying to remember the steps and the patterns we've learned. At the same time it's very good exercise, almost like aerobics. By the end of the evening, you know you've been exercising."

"Because we're in the same age category (as Ms. Seelen), we just marvel at the energy that woman has to sustain herself through all these lessons and running the place. She's a ball of energy," he said. RHL

The U.S. Dance Club is located at 38 New Britain Avenue (Route 160). For information about classes, social dances and parties call 860-529-2888. RHL

Holiday dance parties planned

Besides dance lessons and its regular schedule of social dancing, the U.S. Dance Club (USDC) has two holiday parties scheduled.

A Christmas dinner, dance and show, to benefit the Cromwell Children's Home, will be held December 19, starting with the 7:30 p.m. ballroom class, followed by a buffet dinner, a dance show with teachers and students and dancing till midnight.

USDC students and their guests are asked to bring gifts for residents of the children's home. The fee is \$15 with advance reservations.

A New Year's dance party will be held starting at 9 p.m. on New Year's Eve. It will include a buffet with food supplied by students and their guests.

The event is BYOB, with favors, ice and setups available.

Admission is \$15 in advance, \$20 at the door.

As seen in

Rocky Hill

Dec. 09