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At 80, Shirley Marley is still dancing — and turning out stars

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SPECIAL TO THE STAR



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At 80, Shirley Marley is still dancing — and turning out stars (Video by Shane Keyser | skeyser@kcstar.com).
By McClatchy

With her perfectly manicured pink nails and high-heeled tap shoes, Shirley Marley shuffled and slid all over her crowded classroom for an hour without breaking into a sweat. Three dozen young students clicked and clacked behind her, following her every move, eager to catch up.

As she guided her students through a complicated dance routine, Marley smiled warmly at them. She was doing exactly what she loved on her 80th birthday.

With her petite stature and humble demeanor, Marley is more than just a dance teacher with a milestone birthday this month. She's the quiet force behind generations of dancers, actors, singers and producers who have achieved significant success in the entertainment industry.

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music video.

Her studio, the Miller Marley School of Dance and Voice at Marley Dance Studio, at 10448 Mastin St. in Overland Park, has been named on so many resumes that casting directors in Los Angeles and New York often joke that there must be something in the water in Kansas.

Located in a shopping center near 103rd and Mastin streets, the Miller Marley studio is known to its students for being more about hard work than a star factory, however.

And Marley is extremely familiar with hard work. Growing up on a farm in Iowa with no electricity or running water, Marley spent her early childhood digging for potatoes and picking green beans off the vine.

At 6, she and her family moved to Kansas City, where her father got a job making airplane parts.

During World War II, as an elementary school student, she started taking dance lessons in a church basement near 48th Street and Prospect Avenue.

The owner, who was not a very talented dancer, ignored bookkeeping and avoided taxes by accepting tuition in cash, stuffing the bills in her pockets and often losing a few in the parking lot. But the unconventional businesswoman always remembered who paid and who owed her money, Marley recalled.

From the moment she first strapped on ballet slippers at the age of 6, dancing came naturally.

The work required of her mother for her daughter's dance career came less naturally. In the 1940s, there were no costume companies, forcing each student's mother to make elaborate creations out of newspaper patterns.

"My mom wasn't a (seamstress), so she was mind-boggled by all the work," Marley said. "Sometimes she had to sew one sequin on at a time. There were a lot of tears. Costumes were hung all over the dining room curtains in our tiny house."

As a teenager, Marley began teaching classes at the school, although she was never paid. When the school's owner took off to Chicago with her husband in 1954, the reins were passed to the talented 18-year-old.

Since she couldn't afford college, Marley decided that continuing the dance school would be her next logical step after high school graduation. She moved operations into the basement of a post office near 72nd and Prospect. She got married, had a son, Shawn, and then got divorced.

In her mid-20s, fate intervened when Shirley Miller, as she was then known, was introduced to Johnny Marley, a dashing ballroom dancer. He was a single father with a young daughter named Belinda.

After a whirlwind romance, the two got married and opened the Miller Marley dance studio at the brand new Ward Parkway Mall in 1963.

Johnny Marley taught tumbling and took care of business. His new bride taught everything else. That first year they had 1,300 students.

"Of all the teachers I had in my life, Johnny was the greatest," Shirley Marley said. "He instilled discipline and high standards in me. He sharpened my business skills."

Through the 1960s their business flourished. Johnny Marley persuaded the owner of the Kansas City Chiefs to let the school's new drill team, the Chiefettes, perform at games. It was a tradition that lasted 20 years.

That decade, Shirley Marley also choreographed shows at Starlight Theatre.

In the midst of their success, the couple's marital bliss was cut short. In the early 1970s her husband grew restless and bored with his life in the Midwest. He longed for adventure.

He asked Marley to drop everything and travel the world with him. She declined. She loved running the school.

Then one day he left, and she never saw him again.

Over the next decade she received letters from him, postmarked from all over the world — Japan, France, Morocco, Nepal and even the Amazonian jungle, to name just a few locations. They corresponded back and forth until the connection vanished mysteriously in the 1980s. Marley has no doubt she is a widow, but it is still not officially known.

Over that period the studio continued to grow and attract talented and devoted dancers from across the Kansas City area. The school moved to the Ranch Mart Shopping Center in Leawood before settling in at its current location in Overland Park around 30 years ago.

With the addition of several talented instructors, Marley focused primarily on teaching tap, her favorite form of dance. To this day she teaches 14 hours a week.

But while the studio flourished, her life took a couple major hits.

In 1985 her 27-year-old stepdaughter, Belinda Murray, was brutally murdered in the parking lot of a restaurant after a dispute with its owner. The restaurant owner then shot another woman before being killed by the restaurant's cook, who then committed suicide.

The complicated case drew national headlines, while Marley deeply mourned for the young woman she had raised as her own daughter.

Tragedy echoed nearly 30 years later, when her son, Shawn Miller, was killed in a house fire in Overland Park in 2014. Miller had helped run the dance studio with his mother.

Despite all the losses in her life, Marley is surrounded by a large, tight-knit dance family who vows never to leave her side.

Former students, living all over the world, often come back to visit. Many of her dance instructors at the studio are former students, dating to the 1970s. And quite a few of her current students are children or grandchildren of alumni.

“We have this family of dance, going back generations and generations, and our one common denominator is this woman who made it happen for us,” said Shannon Durig, a former Miller Marley student now living in New York. “Shirley gave all of us a safe haven where we could express ourselves. She gathered these kids from Kansas into a strip mall and showed them how to take over the world.”

Durig, 34, gained fame a decade ago when she snagged the much-coveted role of Tracy Turnblad in the Broadway musical “Hairspray.” It was a role that lasted five years.

These days the red-headed actress guest stars on television shows and travels the country for singing and dancing gigs.

And every time she flies back home, one of the first people she sees is Marley, whom she considers a second mom. The two spend hours shopping, going to lunch and choreographing tap routines, which they then co-teach to Marley's classes.

Durig can't remember a day in her life without Marley. After all, she met the studio owner when she was 3 years old. At 5 she was placed in Marley's tap-dancing class.

“Shirley grabbed my hand, and we did a tap set together, and it was instant chemistry,” Durig recalled. “I fell in love with her in that moment, while we were talking in rhythm.”

Their strong bond prompted Durig to make a documentary about Marley's life. The yet-to-be-titled film is slated to be finished later this year.

As a filmmaker, Durig has spent the past year traveling the country interviewing dozens of former Miller Marley students who have found success in show biz.

“All these people — even composers and radio show hosts — insist they wouldn't be where they are today without Shirley Marley,” Durig said. “And they get emotional about it.”

One of the recurring sentiments that Durig said her interview subjects have stressed is that while Marley pushes her students to their greatest potential, she knows their limits and treats them with kindness.

Marley's passion for dance and full heart are what gained her some of her closest friends, a few of whom have come out of unusual circumstances.

One of those friends is Mickey Levey. On April 14 he brought cake to the Miller Marley dance studio for all the students to enjoy, in celebration of Marley's 80th birthday. He's been bringing her students cake on her birthday for more than 30 years.

Levey was a divorced father of two young daughters when a friend took him to Ward Parkway Mall in 1977 to meet a woman who turned out to be Marley's friend. While there, Marley suggested he bring his daughters to her dance school. When he asked them later that day, they didn't want to go.

But Marley wouldn't take no for an answer. She cheerfully showed up on his doorstep and proceeded to teach the girls some dance moves in their kitchen. Not only did his daughters join the school, but now Levey's granddaughters are students of Marley.

"Very seldom do you meet someone who changes your life so profoundly," Levey said. "God smiled on me the day he introduced me to Shirley. My entire adult life has centered around this studio. She gave a divorced father a purpose in life. It's been a great ride."

Over the years another close friend sprang out of the blue. Her son's best friend from high school, Brian McGinness, joined Miller Marley as an instructor and is now the school's director.

Marley proudly calls him the heart and soul of the business.

"Johnny is the reason there's a Miller Marley, and Brian is the reason it keeps going," she said.

The respect is firmly mutual. For 30 years the two have started each morning by meeting up for coffee nearly every single day.

"If you had told me that one day my best friend's mom was going to be my best friend, I would have thought you were crazy," McGinness said, with a laugh. "But even though there's a 22-year age difference between us, I can't imagine my life without her, and I know others can't as well. She's shaped the lives of people who have gone on to be Broadway stars or even kindergarten teachers."

Although Marley still teaches several tap classes a week, and most of her staff has been with her for a lifetime, she will not tolerate Miller Marley being labeled "old-school." Over the past five decades the school has morphed with the times, she makes a point to say.

When hip-hop became a movement, Miller Marley embraced it. When modern and lyrical dance became cool, the school added the style to its roster.

Now the school is featuring competitions, a trend that has exploded with the recent popularity of the hit Lifetime reality TV series "Dance Moms." And every year Marley travels to dance conventions and takes master classes to learn new skills.

But what makes the dance school, with its 700 students, truly unique is offering young people the big picture. Students are encouraged to not just shine in one category of dance but all of them. Most students take a huge variety of classes — ballet, tap, jazz, hip-hop and Broadway, for instance. Others take vocal lessons as well.

"If you want to dance as a career, you need to be well-rounded in order to secure jobs," said Ann McCroskey, a Miller Marley instructor. "If you go to an audition and they throw out a tap number at you and you don't know how to do it, you've lost that job. We teach you to be one step ahead in this business."

It is that mission alone that has allowed hundreds of students to flutter away from the Overland Park studio and fly straight into stardom. Notable alumni include:

▪ Ierald Vincent, a Broadway star and film actor. He began his career as an ensemble member in the original Broadway cast of Elton John and

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African-American to portray the beast in the national tour of Beauty and the Beast.

- Michelle Opperman, a fitness guru. She started out dancing for the New York Knicks in the NBA and being cast in Broadway performances and MTV appearances. But she morphed her career into health and fitness, and now is a personal trainer and group fitness instructor with a devoted national following. She is also the master trainer for major fitness brands such as Pound, Jillian Michaels' Bodyshred, and Crunch.
- Kristin Sudeikis, choreographer, dancer and artistic director of Kristin Sudeikis Dance Company. She is one of the biggest names in the dance industry, with her choreography being featured on NBC's "30 Rock" and in music videos and tours for recording artists. She has also been featured in magazines, such as Marie Claire, Vogue and Shape. But it is her passion for using movement to ignite social activism that has made her a star. For example, she recently choreographed and produced "Stand," a benefit to promote awareness of the human-trafficking epidemic.

Marley is proud of each of her students and the success many of them have achieved in the dance world. On the back wall of her classroom, hundreds of glossy photographs of her former students smile at her every day.

She loves reading about their adventures on Facebook, and she's tickled every time she's watching television and spots one of them dancing at an awards show or guest-starring on a sitcom.

Dancing quietly behind their fame is exactly how Marley prefers it. A self-proclaimed introvert, she would rather drum up tap routines in her empty classroom or watch "The Bachelor" — her guilty pleasure, she admits with a grin — at home with a few good friends rather than bask in the spotlight.

And as for her birthday, she'd really rather not make a big deal out of it.

"I feel no different at 80," Marley said. "I have good genes, so lasting this long has nothing to do with me. I don't even eat properly. I love chocolate."

Her fellow dance instructors point out that Marley remains extremely youthful because she keeps her mind sharp. McCroskey said Marley is often found reading a newspaper or magazine.

For others, the secret to Marley's youthful demeanor is obvious: It's dance.

"She can tap circles around me easily," said Mark McNeal, a 32-year-old engineer who takes lessons from Marley, just for fun. "She's full of energy. Shirley proves age isn't as big a factor as people would think."

Marley has no plans to put her tap shoes away any time soon, either. She vows to teach her classes and dance for the rest of her life. She has no plans to retire.

"I haven't worked a day in my life," she said. "Well, I have worked, but when I'm dancing it doesn't feel like work. I'm lucky that I get to do what I love every single day."

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