

# PIVOTAL | PIROUETTES

DANCE MINOR ROUNDS OUT STUDENTS' ACADEMIC STUDIES

By Sherrie Flick



Opposite page: Wilkes dance students participate in a presentation of *The Nutcracker* each December. PHOTO BY MARK GOLASZEWSKI

**K**AREN WESOLOWSKI HOUCK '07 may not be a professional dancer. But her dance minor shaped her career and life in other ways.

"Dance gave me a sense of stress relief, kept me in shape, and helped prepare me for teaching children," says Houck, who majored in elementary education and now teaches sixth grade near Reading, Pa.

Wilkes began offering dance classes in 1991, approaching professional dancers Kristin Degnan and her late husband Peter to enhance the music and theatre departments by incorporating dance into the curriculum. By 1993, the dance minor was a reality. From the start it offered ballet, modern, jazz and tap.

Wilkes junior Dan Pascoe, a theatre major, agrees. "Taking dance at Wilkes has made me more comfortable with my body," he says. "A minor in dance has made me a better actor and performer."

Students love that they can still perform *The Nutcracker*, Degnan notes. They appreciate that graduating from high school doesn't have to mean giving up dance.

That's what appealed to junior English major Caroline Jones. Dance was already a lifelong passion, but not to the exclusion of an academic degree. "I sat in on one of Kristin's classes before coming to Wilkes, and I immediately knew that doing both was the right fit for me."

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– Kristin Degnan



A spring dance recital showcases students' skills. PHOTO BY CURTIS SALONICK

Degnan says education, nursing and psychology majors, among others, also see the benefit of learning dance in their chosen professions. The enrollment of men has risen in the last several years. Dance 100 has grown to a 60/40 split, with many football players, wrestlers and cross country runners signing up.

The program is small and individualized. Currently, 30 to 40 students pursue the 18-credit dance minor, with more than 200 students signing up for dance courses each semester. Many try dance for the first time.

"In those first-timer classes, we have a lot of fun," says Degnan. Beginners are graded on progress and attitude.

Each spring the dance program offers a mixed repertory program with works choreographed by both faculty and students. Each December, they perform *The Nutcracker*.

A Wilkes-Barre native, Degnan began her training at Wilkes-Barre Ballet Theater at 5 years old. By 16, she had graduated from high school and was performing professionally in Louisville, Ky. This passion led to a bachelor's degree

in dance. She also met husband Peter, who was also a professional dancer.

The Degnans were touring throughout the U.S. and abroad when a dance school in Wilkes-Barre came up for sale. In 1983, the couple purchased it and opened Ballet Northeast, now in its 25th season.

After the untimely death of Degnan's husband in January 1999, the University offered her an artist-in-residence position. She now holds the title director of dance and has added three adjunct staff to the dance faculty: Sean Harris, Kris Cross and Lynne Mariani. In addition, Kimberly Hurt leads classes in dance therapy.

Degnan educates her students about the traditions and history behind dance to help them develop a foundation of knowledge. She feels that even if they don't become lifelong dancers, they can become lifelong supporters of the arts.

"The arts are for everyone," says Degnan. "They help shape us as human beings. They civilize us. Make us human."

Degnan says students often say things like, "I was nervous about my test when I woke up, but after your class I feel focused, relaxed, and I know I can do it." That's when she knows she's done her job.