

Irish Heritage Center offers Irish hospitality and award-winning theater

Usher. Danny DeVito. Vanessa Williams. Peter Frampton. Eddie Murphy. Do you find it surprising to learn a local Cincinnati taught dance to the children of these celebrities during the 1980s and 90s? Maureen Kennedy, Director of the Irish Heritage Center in Columbia-Tusculum (C-T) founded The Art of the Dance Academy in North Hollywood in 1983 and also helped develop the NOHO Arts District. Today, however, the tenacious Kennedy has wholeheartedly jumped into a new venture of bringing Irish culture, history, the arts, literature, dance and hospitality to Cincinnati by founding the Irish Heritage Center (IHC) with husband Kent Covey.

When Kennedy and Covey moved to Cincinnati in 2001, she was surprised to learn the community, where 30% of the population has Irish roots, had no Irish heritage or cultural center.

"I believe in Ireland – the essence of it – the people and its hospitality," Kennedy explains. Over the next few years, she founded the Irish American Theater Company and remembers how those early years were somewhat crazy:

"I taught drama and dance classes

at the Kennedy Heights Art Center, on my back porch and in parking lots. The theater performed at the Celtic Festival at Old Coney, at the Cincinnati Museum Center and at Thomas More College." She and Covey also moved to Hyde Park and began to dream of a place where people could be introduced to the Irish culture, arts and literature that she loves.

In 2009, after some significant bumps and hurdles, viewing 100 different properties, and negotiating with Cincinnati Public Schools, Kennedy and Covey purchased the 1876 historical McKinley School situated on Eastern Avenue in Columbia-Tusculum. The beautiful auditorium, part of a 1917 addition, had Celtic knots carved into the proscenium arch and, on the velvet curtain over the stage was embroidered the letter 'M'. Kennedy proclaimed, "It's a sign." It was, in fact, a very good sign.

In the spring of 2010, the doors of the Irish Heritage Center (IHC) opened to rave reviews for the play, *Moll*, written by John B. Keane. Since then, the Irish American Theater has performed *Blood, What Happened, Bridgie Cleary?* and *A Couple of Blaggards*. It performs around

the world, has been nominated at three consecutive appearances in the Acting Irish International Theater Festivals in Chicago, Calgary and Dublin, Ireland, for the categories of Best Show, Best Actress, Best Actor and Best Supporting Actor and has won top prizes twice for Best Actress and once for Best Supporting Actor.

The IHC also has presented other theater productions and re-enactments such as *Bloomsday*, the *Easter Rising*, the *City of Immigrants*, *The Quiet Man* and fabulous St Patrick's Day and St Patrick's Parade day celebrations. Special musical performances with groups & exhibits brought in from Ireland are scheduled throughout the year.

By helping to establish the Tusculum "arts corridor," Kennedy and the local Community Council are making space for more arts groups to locate in the C-T corridor area. The IHC offers a wide-range of classes and events and participates in the C-T Home Tour and Macy's Arts Wave Sampler, both of which promote the arts in Cincinnati. January events included Mick and Friends "Irish Pub Night," Celtic Women International and "Discover Your Roots," a tribute to your family ancestry.

Ongoing is the American Celtic Artists Exhibit and the James Joyce Exhibit from Dublin Ireland's National Library – Saturdays from 11a.m. to 2 p.m. and Tuesdays and Thursdays from 5-8 p.m. Of course, the St. Patrick's Day Parade and Celebration in March is one never to be missed!

Currently, the Irish Heritage Center is offering an Ireland Getaway raffle: Tickets are \$20 each or 3 for \$50 - The winner will enjoy a weekend stay at Waterford Castle, dinner for 2, breakfast both days, golf, and a \$1000 travel allowance. For more information, visit www.irishcenterofcincinnati.com or call (513) 533-0100.

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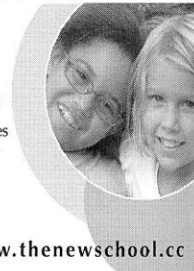
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