

# Homewood's American Dance Center Celebrates 50 Years of Dance

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Be prepared and don't compare. Make use of your talents.

These principles guide Jack and Kathleen Villari, founders and owners of American Dance Center (ADC) which celebrates its 50th year in December. The couple founded the school in 1971 in Kathleen's family's bowling alley in Richton Park, and they opened their doors at 1933 Ridge Road in Homewood 20 years ago.

"It was 2001 when we took [the Homewood] place. We were supposed to open on 9/11," Kathleen said, "and when everything happened, we were like, 'What are we supposed to do?' We decided to move forward with the classes because we felt the parents and the children needed to keep life going on. So we took that leap to continue our commitment to this community."

"There's so much to say, though," Jack said. "The whole story is: How did we even come together?"

That whole story rolls out like the sweeping plot of a Broadway show. It's the tale of Jack, a songwriter from Cleveland who—urged by talent scouts from the booming 1950s recording industry—made his way to New York. It features Kathleen, a talented dancer from Olympia Fields, who had gone to that same city in hope of joining the world-renowned Ballet Russe de Monte-Carlo (she did). The plot turns when each lands a spot with the national touring company for Camelot.

First, they meet on a train carrying the cast to its next engagement.

"Everyone was asleep," Jack said, "but I couldn't sleep, so I started walking the train. There was one girl awake and she was reading a book, so I said hi ... we sat down and never did stop talking through the ride. But then [the train ride] ended, and we went our separate ways."

On the night of JFK's death—still touring in the same sprawling theater company—both find their way to the same Pittsburgh chapel to pray for the assassinated president.

"I'm in church, I look straight down the row and there's only one other person in church and I say to myself, 'That looks like the girl I met on the train,'" Jack said. "That's what got us here. It's been being in the right place



Provided photo

Getting experience performing on stage is an important part of dance education, and American Dance Center provides its students with opportunities to perform in various venues, from professional-quality showcases to holiday windows and community festivals.



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Jack and Kathleen Villari, owners of American Dance Center, met while part of a theater touring company.

at the right time and being prepared."

"I was the dancer; he was the singer. That was the beginning," Kathleen said.

Everything that has sprung from that start could fill a book. ADC has received dozens of nominations and awards, both locally and nationally. The studio has moved and expanded to include an Orland Park location.



Eric Crump/H-F Chronicle

A crowd watches a dancer in the window of the American Dance Center during the Holiday Lights festival in Homewood on Dec. 3.

The founders have been on the cover of magazines and wrote the very first book on disco. Their dancers have graced the stage of the Rialto Square Theatre and entertained crowds at the Orange Bowl.

The Villaris have performed around the globe (including a 10-day stint in the Philippines as the first American instructors ever welcomed at the

Asian Dance Exchange), and they've infused the South Suburbs with their passion for dance for generations. According to Kathleen, there are not only children of former students currently enrolled at ADC but even some grandchildren.

"Dance is a cultural experience and a reflection of a community. It brings people together," Kathleen said.

One of their contributions to Homewood's culture is their holiday windows. Each year, ADC's dancers perform in the studio's picture window during the village's winter holiday events, creating scenes and tableaux reminiscent of nostalgic State Street displays.

Homewood Mayor Richard Hofeld said the dance center's window performances are a key part of the village's annual Holiday Lights festival.

"The enthusiasm of the Villari family is wonderful. I think that's typified in their Christmas windows," he said. "To me, that's one of the highlights of Holiday Lights. It's like a fairytale to watch that."

This year, in addition to the Holiday Lights performance, there will be a window dedicated to ADC and the Villaris celebrating 50 years of dance and 20 years in Homewood. The window, located at 2018 Ridge Road, features photographs spanning the pair's careers as both dance educators and performers.

Students at ADC have the opportunity to study classical ballet and pointe, jazz, tap, modern, lyrical dance—as dance has evolved, so has the Center. The Villaris adhere to tradition, though, when it comes to dancer attire. Black leotards, pink tights, hair pulled neatly out of the way. Student ages range from three to adult, and recitals are held on the stage of the Center for Performing Arts at Governors State University.

"We teach discipline and respect; that philosophy permeates through this school," Kathleen said. "The American Dance Center did not invent dance; it's an integral part of being human. We're just using our gift to present it to our community."

"My life has been guided and I just try to be open and do what I'm meant to be doing, and it's worked," Jack said. "We can't stop. It's our God-given gift."