

St. Albans Messenger
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By Staff Writer LEON THOMPSON

ST. ALBANS CITY — Two weeks ago, he and the woman he dubbed “my lovely wife, Kate” were at the Ballet School, a dance studio at the intersection of Routes 104 and 36, pointing toward Fairfield.

Class was done. They were alone. So they practiced a routine – the Cha-Cha. He improvised new variations on familiar steps and faltered. She laughed. He knew she would, given their chemistry.

High energy filled the studio. The interaction? Sweet, positive. The atmosphere? Fun, exhilarating.

“It was just a really great dance,” he recalls.

And that particular dance illustrates why Kevin Laddison loves what he does.

Granted, Kevin looks like his day job. His eyewear, build and haircut announce that he conducts molecular biology research at the University of Vermont (UVM). He is a 38-year-old, St. Albans City scientist. He clones genes. He breeds mice.

But when Kevin dons his Diamant dance shoes – the leather-and-felt brand that go for \$120 to \$150 a pair – move over Petrie dish. Time for hot feet.

Kevin is a certified ballroom dance instructor, a Vermont rarity. He has a junior associate’s degree in American Style Smooth & Rhythm. Want to waltz? Fox Trot? Tango? Rumba? Cha-Cha? East Coast Swing? Kevin has all the moves.

Kevin logs 14 hours of weekly instructional time between Burlington and St. Albans, in addition to his research career and co-raising a teen-age daughter from a previous marriage. He also spends \$700 a month to rent studio space.

By year’s end – still unbeknownst to UVM – he will quit his \$35,000 a year job and focus on full-time dance instruction. Sitting in the dining room of his Upper Welden Street home, he expresses trepidation about taking that leap.

“But my lovely wife, Kate, has insurance,” he says. “That was

the only real concern. But doing this will give me time during the day ...”

“... to clean the house!” Kate calls from the kitchen.

“... to clean the house,” Kevin repeats, nailing his cue. “And maybe get another job during the day, if I have to.”

For now, though, he is focused on Friday, when he will host the Third Annual Camp Ta-Kum-Ta Benefit Partner Dance Showcase. In its third year, the event benefits Camp Ta-Kum-Ta, a weeklong camp for children ages 7 to 17 who have or had cancer.

Since 2003, the showcase has raised more than \$7,000 for the camp. About 85 dancers will perform in this year’s showcase, which starts at 7 p.m. in the Elley-Long Music Center at St. Michael’s College. (The \$20 ticket also gets you a 30-minute dance lesson following the show.)

“It must be nice for Ta-Kum-Ta campers to know there are people out there in the community from all different backgrounds and interests who want to help them in some small way,” Kate says. “For the dance community, it’s a wonderful opportunity to use the love of dance to do something truly selfless and helpful.”

That is her husband’s teaching style: Selfless and helpful. He earns joy by watching people learn new skills, exercise, and lift each other with the sense of touch.

“Every half hour I teach people, I see them learn something they can do for the rest of their lives,” he says. “In my day job? It’s entirely possible anything I’ve done will never positively affect someone.”

‘Quick, quick, slow’

This Friday evening class is small but eclectic. All ages. All levels. It is Catherine McGuinness’ and Will Adams’ first session. Both 17, both from Fairfax, they have been dating two years.

“We figured this was better than going to a movie again,” Catherine says.

Joyce Chase, 51, of St. Albans, is the group veteran tonight, now four years into Kevin’s classes.

Then – there’s Lou Johnson of Winooski. He’s 65 and eager

for a partner, until Joyce arrives.

“Hi, I’m Lou,” he says. He extends his hand.

“Hi,” she replies.

“Tell me you’re single.”

“I am.” She giggles.

“Do you have a lot of money?” he asks.

“Not enough,” she says.

The group laughs, especially Kevin. He is patient with his students as he explains basic Rumba and Tango steps.

“Quick, quick, slow,” he chants. “Quick, quick, slow.”

Will struggles most.

“Do you know what’s wrong?” Kevin asks.

“Yeah,” Will says. “I’m moving the wrong foot.”

“I know that. Do you know why?”

“No.”

More laughter; it’s a staple of Kevin’s classes and how he reacts each time he watches the DVD of his first stage performance in 2001. In a word? Awkward. He has come far in five years.

Kevin never attended dances at Canton High School in upstate New York, where his parents, Janet and Leo, raised six children. (Eight people shared a 10-bedroom house that had three bedrooms – three boys in one, three girls in the other.)

In high school, Kevin ran track and field and cross-country, but was “never any star athlete by any stretch of the imagination.”

As for science – he just fell into it. He excelled in the biology, chemistry and physics portions of New York’s standardized tests and scored in the ninety-ninth percentile in the biology section of his Graduate Record Exam.

Next thing he knew, he was armed with a bachelor’s degree in biology, a master’s degree in microbiology and molecular genetics, and working for Pfizer Inc.’s Groton, Conn., branch in 1995.

Two years later, he divorced. His ex moved to California with their child. He was 29.

That Labor Day Weekend, Kevin discovered dancing at a Cajun festival near his Connecticut home. Nearly 20,000 people crammed under tents in a large farm field. It was hot. Kevin couldn’t

dance, and he knew it. Then he realized: It didn't matter.

“This is why guys dance – right here,” he says, raising his index fingers like goal posts, to stress his point. “You get to meet people. It was great. I was terrible, but for the two or three minutes these women got to dance with me, they didn't care.

“Also, dancing releases endorphins, because you can touch people. I had just gone from touching my daughter all the time, to barely seeing her. I got used to having all this physical contact, and suddenly it was gone. Then I danced. I got to touch again. It was fantastic.”

In 2000, Kevin followed his daughter to Oakland, Calif., to be closer to her. Pfizer acquired Warner-Lambert, which had a site in Oakland, so Kevin could keep his job.

Two months after Pfizer paid for Kevin's move, the company fired everyone at the Oakland facility. He received nine months pay and \$5,000 for educational advancement, with no restrictions.

He invested it all into ballroom dance certification. He has been teaching for four years.

“Being fired was the best thing that happened to me,” he says. “It was great!”

Next steps

Kevin's face glows upon any mention of “Dancing with the Stars,” the hit ABC series that pairs professional dancers with B-list celebrities.

The third season, which started this week, features football player Emmitt Smith, talk show icon Jerry Springer, and one of those three guys from “Saved by the Bell” – but not Screech.

Kevin credits the program for thrusting ballroom dancing into the mainstream and introducing “the sport” to an audience that might have otherwise shunned it. (Incidentally, ballroom dancing has been considered as an official Olympic event.)

The list of Kevin's heroes may mean nothing to most everyone else, but to him, they are like Derek Jeter or David Ortiz to a Little Leaguer.

There's: Ron Montez, seven time American-Latin champion;

Jim and Jenell Maranto, the married, two time U.S. National American Style Ballroom champs; and Bob Powers and Julia Garchakova, 12 time U.S. Rhythm champions.

“Twelve years in a freakin’ row!” Kevin exclaims. “Can you imagine being the best in the nation at ANY-thing for 12 years in a row?”

Unlike those pros, Kevin has no sights on competition. He’s too old, he says. He started too late, he says. He’d rather teach, he says. He’s also passed his passion on to his wife.

Kate never took dance as a child, though she secretly wanted to. After a series of life-altering events in recent years, she “came to the realization that life is way too short and way too uncertain to wait until later to try things that look like fun.”

She met Kevin at one of his classes in January 2004 and quickly became the Ginger to his Fred. They wed last June in Las Vegas.

“It never entered my mind that I’d marry a dance instructor of any kind,” Kate says. “And I started taking lessons not because I wanted to meet someone, but because I wanted to dance. So Kevin was a complete surprise. And still is.”

Within the next couple weeks, Kate will take certification exams for waltz and Fox Trot, partly to help with Kevin’s business – First Step Dance – and partly for the learning experience. She’s nervous.

“While I enjoy dancing,” she says, “being in the spotlight is somewhat out of my comfort zone.”

So, Kevin, is Kate’s anxiety warranted?

“Sure,” he says.

He failed his first test, barely. He’s not sure if she realizes the challenge she faces. He should have studied and danced more with her, he says.

“Of course, she is smarter than I am,” he says, “so maybe that will even out.”

No matter the outcome, he is proud of Kate for sharing his dreams and believes it will strengthen their marriage – the dance that counts.