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Florence ballroom is strictly fun

By **Gavin Jackson**



If you are a dancer in the Pee Dee, chances are you know the dance floor at the Leatherman Senior Center is the place to be on the second Friday evening of every month.

The Palmetto Ballroom Dance Club is the reason they come, joining dozens of other dance enthusiasts there swinging, shimmying, waltzing and just getting down to the beat of music.

The club boasts that it is the only ballroom dance club within 60 miles of Florence, and several travel even longer distances to be there. There are a variety of reasons why members of all skill levels shimmy over every month – the camaraderie, a date night or even the opportunity to learn some moves courtesy of Florence’s best known husband and wife dance instructing duo.

Vence and Pauline Jelovchan have been teaching dance classes to people at the Poynor Adult and Community Education Center for eight of the past 14 years they’ve been dancing and say the dance club is perfect for people needing a break from their normal routines.

“It’s so cool when they learn a dance, it’s so good,” Pauline said. “People just focus on the dance and whatever they’re dealing with out there, they forget in here.”

Dances begin at 7:15 p.m. with an instruction review of past dance styles for learning dancers or those perfecting their technique. The open dance kicks off at 8:30 p.m. and ends at 10:45 p.m. for all dancers to participate in as a DJ Eddie Collins cycles through various types of music for dances like the samba, waltz, cha-cha and others.

“Everyone thinks they have two left feet, but it’s fun to see that they have a right foot,” Donna Gerner, who along with her husband, Rich, help provide additional technique lessons during the dance.

“It’s a lot like golf and that you can do it the rest of your life,” said Rich, though he hasn’t golfed in at least two years since

he keeps up with dancing lessons in Charlotte and at occasional competitions. "But there are more good dancers in their 70s than there are golfers."

In addition to strengthening the skill of others, dancing has strengthened their marriage of 40 years as it is something fun they can do together, just like it has for other couples in the club, like Don and Helen Ellis from Manning.

"The kids are all married and out of the nest, and it's like we're dating again," Helen said. "It's really great."

The couple has had the dances circled on their calendar every month for the past 10 years and look forward to it. "It's special to dress formally and go out dancing," she said.

Members enjoyed casual dress for the summer months, but the dances return to suit and tie for men and dancing attire for women this month shindig, set for Sept. 14. People also bring light appetizers and soft drinks to socialize over during breaks from the dance floor. While it's not quite prom every month, it's still a special event for many.

Dorr Depew and his wife, Chrissy, of Cheraw never danced at their high school proms decades ago and sparsely since then until taking the Jelovchans' class two years ago.

"We pretended to slow dance and move and went to weddings and stood to the side," Dorr said.

"But we took six classes and loved it and took it again and loved it," Chrissy added.

And now the two glide across the floor like they've been dancing since their prom and, with the help of additional practice, keep making it look easier and easier.

"Everyone was very supportive – we were all beginners once," Dorr said. "The challenge is to continue to learn new things. There's some struggle at first but when you get a step it's fun. It's like a sport, you're really never finished."

Not everyone dancing at the club is a couple, so dances feature mixers that let dancers switch partners, adding to the welcoming social environment of the club that will celebrate its 15-year anniversary with a catered black tie dance in October.

The club has open membership that costs \$20 a year per person and monthly dances are \$5 for members and \$10 for non-members. Additionally, the club also has black tie dances for Valentine's Day and Christmas.

While some may stick with dancing, others come and go for people. Don and Helen Ellis said it's the camaraderie, excitement and support that keeps that second Friday marked on their calendar.

"Don't be intimidated by thinking you have to know something," Don said. "We didn't have to know anything, but we kept coming back."

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