

Happy feet

Katie Stephens keeps her Irish dancers hopping

BY MIKE DOUGHERTY '89

Katie Stephens started dancing at the age of 7 and hasn't stopped.

Stephens ('02), program manager of alumni and constituent relations at the University of St. Thomas, grew up in Milwaukee, where she learned the traditional Irish step dancing that she eventually honed to a championship competitive level.

Instead of hanging up her dance shoes when she headed west to college at the University of St. Thomas, Stephens continued to stay in shape, finding a home away from home in St. Paul.

"The summer before I started college and looked online to see if any there was an Irish dance studio here and found one that hired me to teach during college," Stephens said. "It's really part of who I am now."

By the time Stephens graduated from St. Thomas with a major in public relations, she considered all the things she had learned at the dance school. She began considering two jobs: one using her major and another that would tap her "education" in dance.

"By the time four years had passed, I realized I'd done so much with the dance school, dealing with parents, doing public relations," Stephens said. "I thought I could probably do this on my own."

By early 2003, Stephens formed Rince na Chroi (pronounced Rink-a na Cree), Gaelic for "dance of the heart." The St. Paul-based Irish dance school began with 12 dancers, most of them transferring from the school where Stephens worked.

"Things fell into place very quickly using connections at St. Thomas, advertising and word-of-mouth," Stephens said.

And it's grown. Fast.

Nearly four years later, the school has swelled to 130 students. Stephens also employs two part-time instructors, students from St. Thomas and the College of St. Catherine.

"It's grown fast," Stephens said. "Does it surprise me? Yes and no. It's a good thing and a good experience for students. But yes, it has surprised me how quickly it's grown. We're very lucky."

If people are curious about the style of dancing Stephens and her students do, she offers them this: "Riverdance."

"If you say Riverdance, people understand," Stephens said. "Love it or hate it, people have opinions. It's a large commercial dance show and it's drawn a lot of attention to an art form. No matter what, it's a good thing."

Stephens' life is filled with her work at UST where she serves as adviser to the stu-



Katie Stephens relaxes with her Irish dancers before a performance (above) and at KARE Ch. 11 in Minneapolis (below). "It's really part of who I am now," she says.



dent alumni council, the young alumni programs and handles events, such as specialty group reunions. It's a nice fit, she says.

The remainder of her time is with the dance studio. That means she spends about 15 hours a week working on administrative duties, teaching classes and recruiting students

March is the busiest time of year. St. Patrick's Day raises the group's profile and

garners invitations to numerous performances. The dance group has performed with a number of big name Irish musical groups, as well as finding themselves on stages including the Guthrie. Stephens said the group rented an auditorium at Concordia University last year for one night. In March, they'll rent it for two nights to accommodate the demand.

Stephens said uses many of the skills she honed in the St. Thomas classrooms.

"You use your writing skills in so many ways," she said. "Correspondence, press releases, brochures. It's always something. But I also learned

other things: the teamwork I did in my PR classes and just network building."

Stephens sees her future in dance on the business side.

"It's still fun for me, but I know this is my future," Stephens said. "One day I'll be an old lady and not jumping around with the kids. Maybe I'll still try. It's fun." **NB**