

# Not Your Average Barn Dance

**PETERSEN BARN OFFERS LOW-COST ACCESSIBLE DANCE CLASSES TO THE COMMUNITY** by Barbara Marty



PETERSEN BARN OFFERS DANCE CLASSES TO AGES AS YOUNG AS 14 MONTHS

Susan Kincaid never thought she would take dance classes and perform on stage. But, at 44, she finally found herself “brave enough” to step out of her comfort zone and try tap dancing at Petersen Barn Community Center.

“I honestly don’t think I would have considered taking dance classes if it wasn’t here,” Kincaid says. “It makes a big difference to me that it is a community center because I would feel intimidated to go to a dance studio, and because you know ... I’m not your typical person that takes dance class,” Kincaid says, referring to the fact that she doesn’t live up to the classic athletic physique of most dancers.

Most people think of golf or skiing when they think of costly recreational activities, but dance classes can be a financial burden as well. From lessons and recital tickets to costumes and shoes, dance costs can prevent many low-income families from getting involved. Aware of this reality, the city of Eugene’s Petersen Barn proposes affordable dance lessons and equipment for students from toddlers to seniors and beginners to advanced-level pupils.

Ruby McConnell, a local dancer and lead instructor at Petersen Barn, explains how the financial aspect, as well as the competitive atmosphere of many traditional studios, deters a lot of people like Kincaid from giving it a try. “We offered tap classes for three years and got nobody. And then I figured out that was because nobody could afford shoes,” she says. “So now we have tap shoes that people can borrow, and our tap classes are packed.”

From ballet to belly dance and hip hop to tap, Petersen Barn offers a wide range of

options, considering there’s only a single room for practice and performing. The first class is always free and the short sessions — usually between five to six weeks for an average price of \$40 — allow students to find out what type of dance corresponds to them.

Because the program is entirely city-funded, Petersen Barn has also created lessons for people that aren’t the target of regular studios: adult and senior beginners as well as children with physical or behavioral disabilities. Special-needs children are integrated and can take free one-on-one lessons. At the end-of-the-year recital, you may see retirees sharing the stage with wee little ones and teens.

Far from an atmosphere of rigid training, Petersen Barn encourages acceptance and imperfection. No need to be born with swiveling hips to enjoy McConnell’s belly dance classes. The purpose is not to be perfect but to have fun and feel good about your body. “I always tell to my students, ‘You’re at the barn; this isn’t the Bolshoi, you know.’”

Whatever your physical condition might be, everybody has a place on stage at the barn, thus bringing the Eugene community together. “I got kids that get picked up in Porsches and kids that are dropped off by bus, and they’re all in there,” McConnell says with a contagious laugh. “But once you started dancing, those things go

away. Dance is a great equalizer, you know — the ‘Holy crap! This is hard!’” ■

*For more information about dance classes at Petersen Barn Community Center, 870 Berntzen Rd., visit [eugene-or.gov/recenroll](http://eugene-or.gov/recenroll) or call 682-5521.*

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— Ruby McConnell

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