

The Muellers, through their Portland-based An Daire Dance Academy of Irish Dance, put on the annual Lewis and Clark Feis and Feis Na Mara competitions in Seaside and they welcome the public to come watch a slew of dancers – from beginners to international competitors. This year, the back-to-back competitions will be held Saturday and Sunday at the Seaside Civic and Convention Center.

The dancing begins each day at about 9 a.m. and goes until 5:30 or 6 p.m. in the evening both Saturday and Sunday. The championship dancers compete during the morning and the beginners and intermediate dancers compete in the afternoons, and the public can come watch for free at any point during the day.

Jim and Lauren used to teach a group of Irish dance students in Seaside several years ago when Jim worked at what is now the WorldMark by Wyndham resort. Even after the couple moved to Portland to work as school teachers, dance instructors and eventually co-directors of the dance academy, they still returned to the coast occasionally to lead workshops.

They have held Feis Na Mara, which roughly translates to “dance by the ocean,” since 2013. They eventually added the Lewis and Clark Feis as a way for dancers, especially those traveling long distances,



Jim Mueller, who directs An Daire Academy of Irish Dancing in Portland, at last year's Feis Na Mara at the Seaside Civic and Convention Center. The Lewis and Clark Feis and Feis Na Mara will be held this year on Saturday and Sunday.

“two separate opportunities to reach their goals in one weekend,” Lauren said.

Finding a love for Irish dancing

Lauren didn't get into Irish dancing until she was an adult. She was already interested in contra dance and medieval court dancing, but when she saw a video that included Irish dancing, she thought, “That's it. That's the type of dance I want to do.”

She started taking lessons in Nashville and, four months later, was helping instruct other students. She was primarily focused on performance dance at the time and didn't get

involved in more organized and competitive Irish dancing until she moved back to Oregon and connected with a teacher in Seattle.

“That opened me up to a whole new world,” Lauren said.

She met Jim Mueller in the late 1990s, when he was working at the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry. Through commuting together to their class in Seattle, they developed a friendship while simultaneously furthering their dance careers.

Jumping into the competitive side of Irish dancing as an adult is not the norm and was a challenging feat in several ways. With Irish dancing, Lauren said, “you're training your body to do something that's not natural,” which is more difficult in an adult body that often doesn't have the same strength, agility and flexibility.

“We really did have a unique passion to be committed and work with our bodies,” Lauren said.

A family affair

After competing several years and touring in a show for a year, they settled in the Portland area to help their teacher open satellite dance locations. Eventually, the company grew so large – nine locations in six states – he asked them to take it over full-time, and they established the An Daire Academy in 2006.

Irish dancing has now become a family affair in which the Muellers' son and daughter participate.

ter participate.

Lauren remembers being given the parenting advice that “They'll resent this if it's what takes you away from them,” which drove the couple to offer their children opportunities to be included.

“We've always made those options available to them,” Lauren said. “We never wanted to be those parents who forced it on them. It should always be fun.”

Maren Mueller, 15, agreed her journey with Irish dance has been “tied pretty heavily to the family relationship,” but she is grateful for the avenues it has opened up for meeting a myriad of people and “how it's translated into other areas of my life.”

Although she has been dancing since she can remember and instructing dance at An Daire for about three years, her favorite activity related to the dance world is helping organize and run the feisanna, or Irish dance festivals and competitions. It allows her, she said, to exercise other strengths – such as directing people, managing activities and accomplishing various tasks – within an environment with which she is deeply familiar and has a strong connection.

The family puts on six competitions each year, two per each of three locations.

They create décor and awards that relate to the theme for each location. Especially at the two feisanna in Seaside, Maren said, the family tries “to tie in the fun and the themes of the local surroundings.”

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