

## THE ARTS

# Dancing for life



Norm Small

**D**o you think you can teach her to dance?"

"Does he have the talent?"

Questions that might have been asked of the teacher named Betsye Kay Finch. Decades of hearing the questions. Legions of parents wanting the answers.

"Doesn't really matter," might have been the answer given by the teacher named Betsye Kay Finch. Legions of parents may have learned of their kid's dancing skills. But tons of their kids were about to learn more than just dance.

A lot more.

That's because Betsye was teaching life. Even when the studio had no air conditioning.

Discipline mixed with nurturing mixed with mentoring mixed with a shaker of love — and always served with a smile. Betsye Kay was certainly teaching, but the lesson plan was bigger than just Shuffle-Off-to-Buffalo or Ball Change.

"It was always about YOU," recalled Lolly Renfro, herself given a similar responsibility today as choreographer at Harrison School of the Arts.

"I started as a 6-year-old in Betsye's dance studio through high school. She was never intimidating, rather she was caring. Never realized she was teaching me how to treat others. Because of such she would remain both teacher and friend for life."

Good to know for those future teachers of dance.

There was an echo in the room when I spoke to Debbie Bebbert Martin who started classes with Betsye at age 4. Age 4 I wondered? What parent with child that young could even ask a question about talent.

"As it turned out I must have had some. Because Betsye saw something in me as a junior high kid and moved me up to dance with the high schoolers — even though I hadn't quite yet filled out my unitard," Debbie added with a chuckle. "I'd get funny looks from both groups."

"She saw potential in people. Didn't matter how young," Debbie again recalled. "That's because she was not just teaching dance. She was also teaching kindness."

"She was a mentor, and would remain a part of my life. As a student she always seemed to want to take care of me, just me. She made everyone feel that way. Later when I became an oncology nurse the tables turned. I found myself taking care of her."

There goes that friend thing again.

"Betsye taught us how to be strong," said Terrie Templin Weibley, a proud, former student. "She nurtured us, she enhanced the experience. The woman had personality, but she was also wise."

Terrie recalls years back when her grandmother struck a deal with Betsye. "I'll get you students to fill up your classes if you let my daughter take them free." They shook. She took. A future was born.

Betsye was not anyone to look a dance-horse in the mouth.

See THE ARTS, B4

## THE ARTS

From Page B1

Thus Grandma's bargain helped begin Betsye's un-airconditioned life in a Lakeland storefront in the '50s. Most of her students didn't even notice because she cared so much. There, Betsye was to teach them all kinds of dance. Tap was her favorite but love was her rhythm.

And now begins a foundation in her name. It's called the Betsye Kay Finch Performing Arts Foundation. Annual scholarships eventually given to graduating seniors at Lakeland area high schools.

Seems Betsye's still teaching.

It's been said that dance is really sculpture in motion. Turns out Betsye Kay Finch was always in motion, a caregiver who was teaching Life. No one really ever stops doing that in one way or another. Betsye just did it the best possible way.

Perhaps the award should be called The Betsye Kay Scholarship of Friendship and Caring.

For the many who would like to donate the mailing address is:

Betsye Kay Finch Performing Arts Foundation Inc.

4798 S. Florida Ave.  
No. 225  
Lakeland, FL 33813