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Longtime Norwegian Dancers' director says goodbye today

Submitted by Anonymous on Sun, 05/15/2011 - 02:00

By: Hannah Disch

After 12 years as director of the Stoughton Norwegian Dancers, Polly Goepfert is passing her baton to someone else.

Sunday's performance during Syttende Mai will be the last under Goepfert, who is only the group's second director since it was formed by Jeanne Reek in 1953. She will be succeeded by Staci Heimsoth, who works as a physical therapist in Stoughton schools.

Known as Stoughton's "goodwill ambassadors," the group became a cultural institution in Stoughton under Reek's leadership. And Goepfert did a great job continuing that tradition, said Dan Hanson, who with his wife, Jodi, is a member of the Dancers' Parent Group.

"She has been very dedicated to insuring the success of the group and has put the group's needs ahead of her own," Dan Hanson said. "Her personal sacrifices made in support of the group have been many and are greatly appreciated. She is a very 'giving' person, yet strict with her demand for excellence from the dancers."

When Reek retired in 1999, Goepfert thought a previous dancer or parent of a dancer would apply for the position. But when no one did, she decided to give it a try.

Goepfert was certainly qualified. She was a teacher at River Bluff School, a job she still holds today, having more than 20 years in the profession. And she was familiar with the physical rigors dancing could require, as she loved gymnastics as a child and worked as a high school physical education teacher for several years after college and also coached many extracurricular activities.

As director, Goepfert has taken the Dancers on tours all over the United States and also to Norway.

This year Goepfert took her first tour of Texas with the Dancers. They performed for Sons of Norway Lodges, churches, the Fort Worth Stockyard, and many schools. One school broadcast their performance to the entire district of 40,000 students. They also performed for elementary students at Fort Hood, over half of whom had at least one deployed parent.

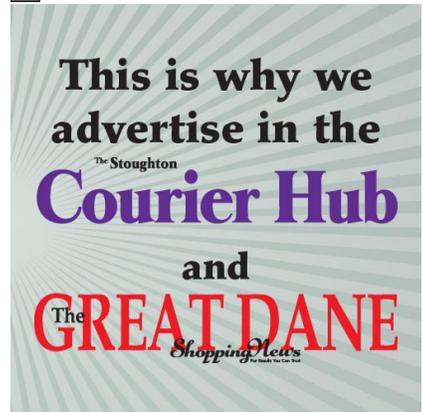
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"The compliments and smiles were endless and the hugs from the elementary students were heart-warming," Goepfert said.

Goepfert said she has enjoyed working with the Dancers over the years.

"My favorite time with the Dancers is the first day of practice to our first performance," she said. "They are just learning the dances and I enjoy watching them teach their partner. The learning curve is the greatest at that time and it is a treat to see the dances finally come together."

The Dancers have touched many lives through their work and Goepfert remembers those times especially.

During a tour of Arizona, for example, the group performed for a retirement community. She recalled one very elderly man struggling to get out of his wheelchair to give the Dancers a standing ovation, a gesture that moved the entire group.

A performance during a tour in Colorado also sticks in her mind.

"We had just finished our performance at a Senior Center," Goepfert said. "The Dancers were packing up the equipment and an older gentleman came up to me with tears in his eyes. I thought something was wrong, but he held my hand with both of his and said, 'I had given up on these next generations, but after watching your Dancers, I have hope for our future. Thank you!'"

Although Goepfert has enjoyed the job, she promised her family when she took the position that she would only keep it for twelve years. She and her husband David have four children, three daughters-in-law and four grandchildren. Their youngest child will graduate from Stoughton High School this year. Of her family Goepfert says, "They have been so supportive and allowed me to miss many major events in their lives, and now it is my turn to follow through on my promise and spend more time with them."

Staci (Dullum) Heimssoth will be stepping into Goepfert's shoes as director after the Dancers' final performance this year. She's been job shadowing Goepfert since last September and was herself a Dancer several years ago.

"Staci will do a wonderful job," Goepfert said. "She has a real heart for the Dancers and I'm very happy to see someone so capable taking my place."

Heimssoth describes her time as a Norwegian Dancer as "the most fun I had in high school." Her grandparents immigrated to the Stoughton countryside from the Trøndelag region of Norway in 1912.

She minored in Scandinavian Studies at Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, studying Norwegian and spending a semester in Norway. Currently she works as a physical therapist both in the Stoughton School District and at Oakhill Correctional Institution in Oregon.

"Polly has taken me under her wing this past year and has passed on much wisdom and knowledge regarding the Dancers," Heimssoth said of preparing for her new role. "She has been a tremendous help. ... It is mind boggling how many people in town, and out of town, help this group of high schoolers to be successful."

Dan Hanson said Goepfert will be missed.

"Jodi and I are proud to have been part of the Parent Group during her tenure as director and appreciate everything she has done for the students, the group, this community and our family," he said.

Goepfert added her own words of appreciation for the community.

"To the people of Stoughton, thank you for your support over the years, that has allowed the Dancers to be such a blessing to so many people."

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