

## Tap Time Passion For Dance Inspires Boynton Beach Teacher.

September 5, 1989|By MICHELLE MARTIN, Special to the Sun-Sentinel

She was a child with a mission.

At age 5, Debbie Dee began taking tap-dance lessons. At 7, her parents set off a room in their house to be her studio. At 13, she began performing professionally, and at 16, she opened her first dance studio in Rochester, N.Y.

Now, in her 30s, Dee lives in Boynton Beach where she teaches private lessons for tap and jazz dance, as well as teaching at two local studios and doing teaching tours.

“I’ve done it all,” she said. “I’ve done Broadway, I’ve done Las Vegas, I’ve done nightclubs, all in some form.”

Dee recently returned from a month-long teaching tour with Dance Olympus, a national dance association that runs seminars throughout the country.

The tour was part of Dee’s now lighter schedule, which includes teaching eight hours a day September through June, spending most of her weekends at dance workshops and touring in the summers.

“I would consider her to be one of the top authorities on tap in the country, and even the world,” said Richard DiSarno, director of Dance Olympus. “So would most of the jazz-tap-ballet teachers in the country.”

DiSarno, who said Dee has worked with Dance Olympus for nine or 10 years, said she judges tap competitions as well as teaching.

“She’s one of our top draws,” DiSarno said.

Dee practices at home in a specially designed studio, with a blond hardwood floor, her album covers and portfolio photos framed on the walls, and about 45 pairs of tap shoes lined up on a rack.

Her stereo is in the closet, set on a rack that stands on the concrete floor. The speakers are on racks on the walls.

The new studio is a far cry from the first one her parents gave her.

“It was maybe a masonite board on the floor and a couple of behind-the-door mirrors on the walls,” she said.

“It wasn’t that I was all that good. But my parents just had the attitude that if you’re going to do something, you ought to do it right.”

Dee said she was not an amazing dance talent when she started.

“My parents started me when I was 5 because I was such a klutz,” she said. “It was at just a general tap-jazz-ballet-baton American-dance type studio, but I didn’t stay there long. My father had this attitude that if you were going to take, you should take from the best.”

That’s why she began taking lessons from old vaudevillians less than a year after she started dancing, even though it sometimes meant driving 20 miles each way to lessons. A couple of years later, she was going from Rochester to New York City for lessons on weekends.

And the reason she keeps doing it, she said, is that she enjoys it. If she didn't enjoy it, she'd quit. But sometimes it's hard to keep going.

"There are times you have to fly to Chicago and teach, and you're just exhausted," Dee said. "You've been on the road for weeks. But when get up on that stage or on that platform, it's a new crowd, and they look at you with the eyes saying 'Teach me something new.'"

And the lessons five days a week when she was a child weren't easy, she said.

"I would have my feet covered with bleeding blisters, walking around in bare feet with powder all over them, but when it was time for class, the shoes would go on and we'd dance."

Dee said she didn't have to be pushed to do it, either. Once she started in September, she knew she would have to stay in it until June, but every June she had the option to quit.

"Every summer they gave me the out, but I never took it," she said. "I loved it."

Dee said she has some students like that now, but most are the once-a-week just-doing-it-for-fun types.

About 10 percent of her students use what they learn professionally, either through performance, choreography or even fields like physical therapy, she said.

This summer, two of her students accompanied her on the Dance Olympus tour. They traveled across the United States teaching groups of teachers, and the two students danced in the demonstration group.

Natasha Rennalls, 17, of Plantation was one of the students. "It was great," she said. "We danced like 24 hours a day."

Rennalls said she has been taking lessons from Dee for about two years.

"She's incredible. She's got the fastest feet in the West when it comes to tap," Rennalls said. "She's just wonderful. And she's the best teacher."

"She's very good at what she does, and cares about her students and their talents. Even if you don't like tap dancing, she makes you like it because she makes it so interesting. She makes you want to come back for more."