



# TOP OF THE CLASS

Marianka Swain celebrates the *Dance Today* Teacher of the Year 2013



From left to right: Pauline Mason has created a community at Danceworks Devon; Pauline with her husband, Rob; pictured outside Danceworks Devon

"I believe everyone can dance," proclaims Pauline Mason, co-founder of Danceworks in Devon and our first-ever Teacher of the Year. "It's more difficult if you don't start when you're young, because you're bound to feel a bit self-conscious, but when we put people at ease, anything is possible."

Pauline has successfully lured thousands onto the dancefloor in more than 40 years of teaching – and she's not finished yet. "I get such satisfaction from it," she explains. "People come in nervous, saying 'You'll never be able to teach me,' and I can't help smiling, because I know they'll be dancing in a minute. We have a free taster evening for our

courses, where you can just sit and watch if you want, but every time, by the end of the night, everyone's up and having a ball.

"I've learned how to read people and adjust my teaching style to suit them – you can soon tell whether they're going to love the social side of things or take it really seriously. We try to guide people either way, so that we're giving the driven dancers every chance to push themselves without frightening off others."

Pauline and her husband, Rob, her dance and business partner, cater to an impressive range at their studio, covering all ages, levels and abilities, as well as a number of styles. "My area of expertise is ballroom,

but we have specialist teachers for ballet, hip hop, belly dancing, fitness and so on. People can start off in one style and then branch out into others.

"I've also taken on different challenges, like teaching a blind student – we've got him up to Bronze level now. He found spinning hard, otherwise I just talked to him as though he could see and helped him sense whether he was facing the wall or the centre. After a few lessons, he joined a group class and most of his partners had no idea he couldn't see."

Another departure is coaching wheelchair dancesport, "which is brilliant as it makes you find new ways of doing things, depending

on whether it's combi-dancing [one standing dancer, one in a chair] or both dancers in chairs. Everything takes a bit longer for the latter, but you can create something amazing.

"We try to find fun ways of making dance accessible, such as Latin In Line and our Singles' Night, created specially for those without a partner. There are lots of people who used to dance with their spouse and now they can't, because the spouse has passed away or is suffering from something like Alzheimer's.

"We don't talk enough about how difficult it is for the bereaved and the carers, who are suddenly very isolated. Becoming part of a dance

community gives them a new lease of life and much-needed support, as well as a positive way to take their mind off things."

That social aspect is key to Danceworks' success: as well as a packed schedule of classes, Pauline runs tea dances, themed social nights and holidays. "We've done 1920s to coincide with *The Great Gatsby*, Bollywood, Hawaiian, Spanish and so on, plus we've started a Sunday special – lunch and dancing with a live jazz band. Our next one is on October 6."

This ethos extends to welcoming non-dancers and making the studio part of the community: the thriving café is open to all, as well as the chance to observe classes. "We want it to be an asset to the area, and not remotely elitist. I'm proud that the South-West is becoming a major dance centre – people tend to think once you go past Bristol nothing happens!"

Pauline is also contributing to the future of the art form, with students taking their Associate exams and entering competitions. "I'm an adjudicator for the British Dance Council, so I understand both sides. I know it can be expensive, but we provide lots of costumes to help keep costs down, and if parents see we're going the extra mile, they do too.

There are 140 children in our Saturday morning class, which is a great sign that kids are still engaged by the arts, no matter what's happening with funding. We do lots of performances, so they feel it's

worth learning to dance, because they can show it off and get a sense of achievement.

"Of course, dance has major health benefits at any age. One gentleman came along to Latin In Line, very overweight, and he was puffing away. Now, he's dancing several times a week, he's lost weight, and it doesn't feel like work. It's great for people with arthritis, heart problems, all sorts – doctors are now writing a prescription for more dancing! It's turned a lot of people's lives around."

On top of that, Pauline is a prodigious matchmaker. "We have seen a few marriages," she notes. "That makes me very happy, because dancing with my husband is a joy – just as well, as the studio is our life! It definitely helps when people see us together, showing them how things should look and also how much fun it is.

"Now our daughter's joined us as a teacher, so it's a real family business, which brings things full circle – I started dancing because my mother took me to a class when I was 13. She'd never danced and felt she'd missed out, and I just fell in love with it."

Pauline competed for a time, but feels teaching is her true calling. "People say to me, 'I don't know how you keep going,' but it doesn't feel like a job when we're meeting new friends every day." As for the future? "A big party to celebrate winning Teacher of the Year! After that, many more years of bringing new people onto the dancefloor." ●

[www.danceworksdevon.com](http://www.danceworksdevon.com)