Shall we Dance?

Thanks to a faculty member, ballroom dancing is a popular pastime at Manchester.
time was, students caught in the act of dancing might have been asked to leave Manchester. But today there’s a movement afoot at MU, thanks to Jim Brumbaugh-Smith ’84, whose passion for ballroom dancing is catching on with students, faculty and staff.

If you’re headed to North Manchester anytime soon, pack your dancing shoes.

Brumbaugh-Smith, who has taught mathematics at MU for more than 20 years, started dancing for fun with his wife, Amy Brumbaugh-Smith ’81, in the spring of 2011. “We just really enjoyed it,” says the associate professor. In Fort Wayne, the Brumbaugh-Smiths met dance instructors Tony Didier and his wife, Daniel Nickels-Didier ’98, a Manchester graduate and former attorney.

“Ever since the ’60s, couples dancing hasn’t been popular. There are three or four generations of people that never were into dancing culture,” says Brumbaugh-Smith. “But it has come back a lot in the past 10 years,” he adds, in part because of the television show “Dancing With the Stars.”

In fall 2014, Brumbaugh-Smith took 10 students to Dance Tonight Fort Wayne and three weeks later, that core group launched the Ballroom and Latin Dance Club at MU. “Dancing is not as difficult as you may think,” says Kari Cottingim ’15 Arnett, president of the club her senior year. “It’s very basic.”

Brumbaugh-Smith also invited Didier to teach physical education courses in ballroom dance at Manchester. It was so successful that they repeated the ballroom course and added one in Latin style dancing last spring, making a total of 70 students learning ballroom and Latin dance last year. This fall, Manchester offered two ballroom classes and a swing dance class.

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— Jordan Lett ’16

For its part, the Ballroom and Latin Dance Club offers informal sessions to practice dances learned in the formal courses. The club offers monthly classes with a certified instructor, outings to public dances, and sponsored events open to all students, faculty and staff. “It’s a good way to get out,” says Derek Self ’16, who attended a spring dance event and recommends it to other students. His friend, Emily Grant ’18, took the first ballroom course and the Latin dance course. The classes are fun, she says, and she’d like to take more.
Dancing is about more than learning steps, adds Jordan Lett ’16, treasurer of the Ballroom and Latin Dance Club and a participant in Didier’s classes. “You become more confident even out of class,” he says. “People can tell you are taking dance.”

The club sponsored its first dance in December 2014. More than 25 students and 10 adults, including some faculty members, attended the Snow Ball in the auxiliary gym of the PERC. For novices and more experienced dancers, an hour-long class preceded the two-hour dance. The club’s second event later in the year drew 45 people. The dances are free to all MU students, faculty and staff. The club teamed with the Alumni Office in October to host a dance during Homecoming too.

Ballroom dance is gaining fans in the community as well, thanks to Have a Ball, Manchester! — a community group led by Brumbaugh-Smith and others in North Manchester. It’s a great way to get to know other people in the area, says Have a Ball member Annita Murfin.

Last spring, MU’s Ballroom and Latin Dance Club invited Didier and Nickels-Didier and the owners of Dance Tonight, Christopher Spalding and Kelly Bartlett, to present a Values, Ideas and the Arts program on “The Artistry and History of Ballroom Dance.” On the Corrigan Auditorium stage, the two couples performed the waltz, foxtrot, tango, rumba, cha cha, hustle, swing and more.

At one time nearly everyone learned how to dance, Spalding told the audience. People dressed up to dance, which promoted good manners and set a standard for men and women to interact in public. “That’s a part of our culture that we’ve kind of lost,” he added. “We’re building it here (at Manchester).”

One of MU’s dance enthusiasts is English Professor Beate Gilliar. “I love dance,” says Gilliar. “Without Jim we wouldn’t have a dance club.”

Brumbaugh-Smith encourages people to give dance a try. “One really neat thing about our experience in the ballroom community is that everybody is trying to help everybody,” he says. “It doesn’t matter how great you are. Just try it. We will be there to help you.”

By Tiana Maclin ’17