



Lyndon Institute dancers teach a class at St. Johnsbury School in Vermont.

Rebecca McGregor

# Making Connections

Find out how one young dance teacher built a thriving program from scratch in rural Vermont.

Rebecca McGregor's high school guidance counselor told her she'd never make a living teaching dance in the K-12 sector. At the time, there were only three full-time high school dance teachers in all of Vermont, her home state, and no dance programs in any of its elementary or middle schools, aside from guest-artist residencies.

McGregor studied dance in college anyway. And not only did she prove her counselor wrong by landing a job, but, in a twist of poetic justice, the school that hired her—Lyndon Institute—is her alma mater's rival.

The private high school in the rural community of Lyndon Center, VT, (about 80 miles northeast of Burlington) is where McGregor has spent the past six years building a dance program and cultivating relationships with teachers across the state to ensure that dance in Vermont thrives. "I took it upon myself to make connections with the other dance teachers out here and find ways of bringing us together," she says.

## First Steps

McGregor started dancing in her hometown of St. Johnsbury, VT, at age 8. When a Costa Rican dancer named Liliana Cubero moved to town a few years later and took over the local studio, McGregor began taking class several nights a week, as well as assisting with baby classes and teaching a summer dance program. Through Cubero, she discovered a healthy approach to movement. "I knew that was what I wanted to do," she recalls. "I wanted to teach."

Fast-forward to McGregor's senior year of college, when she traveled throughout Vermont to research school dance programs. "I learned that no one in the dance field knew of each other," she says. "It became my goal, if I ever got a teaching job, to increase dance awareness and opportunities in schools."

Her chance came earlier than expected, when her mom spotted a newspaper ad announcing that Lyndon Institute was looking for someone to start a dance program. Though she still had a semester of student teaching ahead

## At a Glance

### Lyndon Institute

168 Institute Circle  
Lyndon Center, VT 05850  
802-626-3357  
[www.lyndoninstitute.org/dance.asp](http://www.lyndoninstitute.org/dance.asp)

**Dance program founded:** 2003

**Founder/teacher:** Rebecca McGregor

**Number of students:** about 80

**Program offerings:** Dance I, Dance II, lyrical ballet, jazz, independent study, Pulse Dance Company, Dance Club, Tap Club, guest artists, annual Vermont State Dance Festival

**Performances:** two per year, plus annual spring benefit recital with local schools and studios; company members also perform in talent shows and competitions

**Outreach:** 15 visits per year to elementary and middle schools, after-school dance instruction for elementary school students

of her, McGregor decided to interview for the position just for practice. Two weeks later, she was offered the job. "They waited a semester for me to finish my degree," she says.

### Anatomy of a Dance Program

McGregor started teaching part-time in January 2003, and by the end of the year, she had attracted enough students to support a full-time position the following September. Today, there are about 80 in the dance program—not too shabby for a rural school with a population of 623.

“My students are from all learning levels and socioeconomic backgrounds,” she says, noting that dance has given these children another way to succeed in school. Headmaster Rick Hilton agrees. “It is a delight to see her students strive for excellence, achieve it and receive the approval of the community,” he says. “Rebecca’s stage is a joyful place.”

Classes take place in the school’s historic Lyndon Town House, a sunny, spacious building with high ceilings and wood floors. McGregor teaches two sections of Dance I in the fall and Dance II in the spring, as well as yearlong courses in jazz and lyrical ballet. Her well-rounded curriculum covers history, technique, choreography and principles of anatomy and kinesiology.

As the school’s only dance teacher, McGregor feels it is essential to expose her students to guest artists as often as possible. “Each semester, I try to bring in people who do things differently from me so that my kids can learn something new and get experience from different teachers,” she says.

Serious dancers may audition for Pulse Dance Company, a troupe for sophomores, juniors and seniors. Company members perform and teach in local elementary and middle schools and participate in talent shows and competitions. McGregor also offers independent study courses tailored to students who are planning to continue their dance education in college.

LI’s after-school tap club and dance club, which explores styles from various cultures and time periods, such as belly-dance and swing, are geared toward recreational dancers. “It’s about trying to excite kids about moving their bodies,” McGregor explains. “We let loose and ham it up.”



McGregor helps a student with a *cambré* at the barre.

Courtesy of Lyndon Institute

“I love seeing the students grow physically, cognitively and socially.” —Rebecca McGregor

### Reaching Out

When McGregor started her program, she decided to befriend the local studio owners rather than try to compete with them. The gesture paid off. “The other teachers are very supportive,” she says. “They want their students taking class with me.”

She communicates regularly with the studio teachers, sending her syllabi and weekly outlines to those with students in her classes so they know exactly what she’s covering. “I make it a point to connect to studio teachers so they feel I’m trying to stay on the same page,” McGregor explains. “We share ideas. It’s important for us to connect and talk about the students, because that’s how they’re really going to progress.”

To connect with dance educators and students on a broader scale, McGregor founded the Vermont State Dance Festival. Now in its sixth year, the annual event brings about 150 teachers and students from around the state to the LI campus to participate in classes and performances. In addition to offering professional-level classes, it allows dance teachers from throughout Vermont to meet, collaborate and learn from one another, McGregor says.

Meanwhile, nearby elementary and middle school students get a taste of LI’s dance offerings, thanks to visits from members of Pulse Dance Company. And each spring, McGregor invites other schools and studios to participate in a benefit recital. Four schools took part in

last year’s show, and she’s hoping for a few more this year. Admission is free, but donations are accepted; the proceeds go to organizations that promote child wellness. “We usually have about 500 people in our audience,” she says. “In the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, where hunting is the biggest sport, that’s pretty exciting.”

### Looking Ahead

One of McGregor’s plans for the future is to encourage local schools and dance studios to get involved when guest artists come to town. “It would be great to establish a rotating schedule,” she says, “and have dancers from other high schools and studios participate in the master/open classes offered by the artists in residence.”

After running the show solo for the past six years, McGregor says she’ll eventually start delegating certain responsibilities—though she admits she often feels she could keep going forever. “I could easily work on lessons and choreography 24/7 or until I fall asleep in motion, because I am passionate about my job,” she says. “I love seeing the students grow physically, cognitively and socially.”

For now, she’ll continue forging ahead, doing what she loves. “Rebecca possesses that essential quality of great teachers: a passion for her academic discipline,” says Hilton. “Her lessons instruct her students, but her example inspires them.” **DT**