



The Lil' Rhythm class at Dance Dimensions studio has loads of fun learning their first dance steps.

Dance Adds Dimension to Life

KONI RILEY DEVELOPED AN AMBITION TO OWN A DANCE STUDIO early in life. Her mother, Kay Barber, is a dancer, and her dad, Errol, is a business owner. Riley says she was cut from the same cloth as both.

“I just put the two together,” she says.

After Riley danced and cheered her way through 12 years at Mineola Independent School District, she twirled onward to Kilgore College and then high-stepped to captain of the Pom Squad at Stephen F. Austin State University. While at SFA, she pursued a degree in elementary education, specializing in math with a minor in dance. Her dancing journey has since included stints as a professional dancer for the Dallas Sidekicks soccer team and later for the NBA's Dallas Mavericks dance team.

Riley says she knew all along that she'd return to Mineola to teach dance, and she made quick work of it.

Within a month of graduating college, she married her college sweetheart, Keith Riley. The following month, she says, “I started my dance studio with \$2,000 from my grandfather and a dream.” Her original plan was to teach middle school math and teach dance one or two nights a week, she says. But she never got around to using that teaching certificate, at least not in a conventional classroom.

Riley opened her studio, Dance Dimensions, in 1995 on Blair Street in Mineola, on the same block where she attended middle school. She incorporated “dimensions” into the name

as a nod to her love of math, but it's fitting given the many directions a dancer can express. In May this year, the studio will host its 24th annual recital, and in June, it will begin to celebrate its 25th year.

The studio's season runs September–May to coincide with school schedules. In the summer, it hosts special workshops and a summer camp. It's a schedule that couldn't work better for the Rileys, who are the proud parents of 14-year-old triplets—Kapri, Keilee and Kozbie—all freshmen at Mineola ISD and all dancers. In addition to their many other pursuits, Keilee and Kapri compete in cross-country, while Kozbie plays volleyball.

Dance Dimensions has four performance and competition teams that study, practice and then perform at various local events like Mistletoe and Magic and the Sweet Potato and Iron Horse festivals. In the spring, teams travel for competitions. Teams are organized by age group: Lil' Rhythm for kindergarten through third grade, Strictly Rhythm for fourth through fifth grade, Rhythm Express for sixth through eighth grade and Rhythm Elite for ninth through 12th grade. Classes are Monday–Thursday after school. This schedule frees up the students for performances and competitions on the weekends.

Any child meeting the age requirement can join the Lil' Rhythm class, where they begin to explore dance. Starting with the Strictly Rhythm group, the students must tryout to earn a spot on the competition teams. However, there are plenty of



Koni Riley has always loved dance, her hometown of Mineola and the entrepreneurial spirit. After earning a college degree, she intended to teach mathematics but instead found her rhythm with her own successful dance studio, which soon will celebrate its 25th year.

students who attend classes just for recreation without committing to a competition team.

When it comes to competitions, the younger groups perform locally to save on expenses and travel time. As the dancers get older, they branch out. Middle schoolers travel to Texarkana or other daytrip locales and participate in one two-day competition with an overnight stay. Once in the Elite group, dancers travel various circuits to perform as a team in two-day competitions in tap, ballet, jazz, drill team, pompom, hip-hop, contemporary and other styles. They've traveled to New Orleans, Galveston and Dallas and have entertained at Disney World, Universal Studios and even on a cruise ship.

If all of that sounds like it requires a lot of work and dedication, it also must be fun. Many of Riley's students are what she calls, "DDs 4 Life," and many also earn dance scholarships to college, she says. Once they dance their way through college, just like Riley, some come back home to Mineola—and some even teach at Dance Dimensions. Currently, all but two of the instructors at Dance Dimensions are DDs 4 Life. In addition to Riley, there are nine other full-time teachers and two current high school students on the Rhythm Elite team who also help teach the younger students.

Riley says her greatest joys at the studio are watching students blossom and the fellowship she builds with their families.

"You can't pay for the benefits that dance gives a young lady with coordination, gracefulness and confidence," she says. "And if they become part of a team, there's all of the things that

come along with that such as dedication, commitment and hard work—because other people are depending on you."

Riley's teaching philosophy is not only about the dance. "Dance is a good way to incorporate life lessons," she says. "We always try to teach them their dance steps but other lessons, too."

While the studio is in Mineola, Riley says only about half of the students are enrolled in Mineola ISD. She says Dance Dimensions is more of an East Texas dance studio, and students travel from across the region to take classes. She sees the regional draw as a benefit to her students that broadens their horizons by fostering close friendships with those from other schools whom they might not have met otherwise.

Dance Dimensions also provides some classes for adults, recently made possible by the studio's move to a new, larger space on W. State Loop 564 in Mineola. There is the Mommy & Me class for toddler-mother duos as well as hip-hop and jazz classes for adults. In addition to adult classes, the studio now offers themed party packages, including a Hawaiian hula party, "ice" skating events, epic princess magic carpet rides and a block party where all the cool kids learn the electric slide, cha-cha and other dance moves. Customers also can bring their own theme for the business to execute.

"I'm big on themes," says Riley, who each year assigns a theme for the studio that carries through the entire year and into the year-end recitals held at Caldwell Auditorium in Tyler. This year, the theme is "The Power of Positivity," and all of the songs will have a positive message.



Riley is also big on giving back to the community she loves. She's given free lessons at the elementary school and hosts a weeklong free dance class for kids.

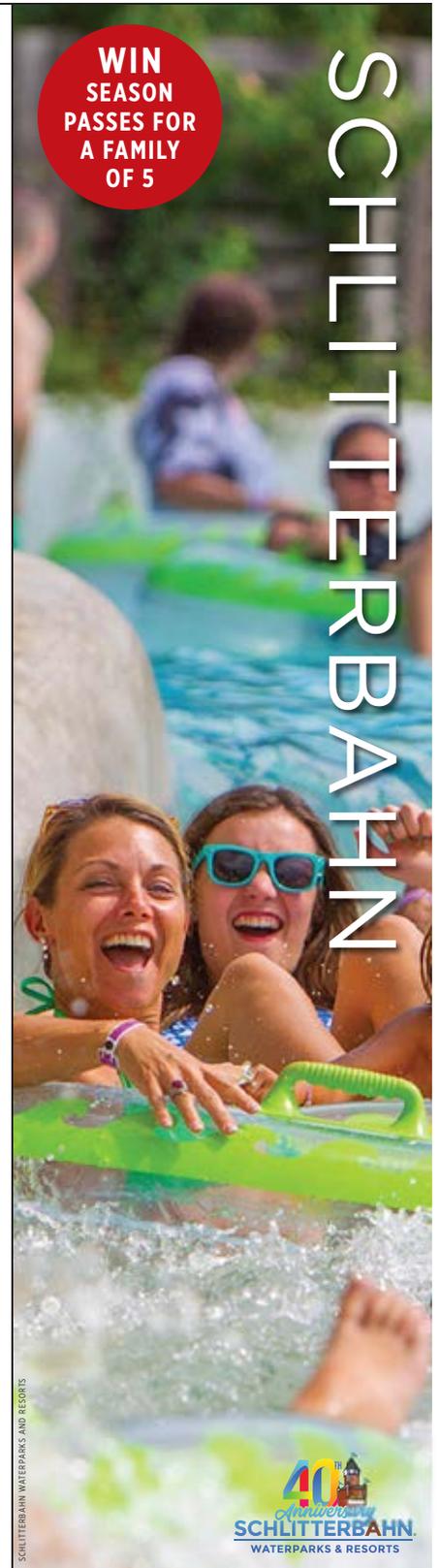
"Some of them may not ever get the opportunity, other than this, to be in an actual dance studio," she says. The studio also presents an annual 5K fundraiser in tandem with the Iron Horse Festival. Along with that, Riley hosts a 5K fitness program focused on fun, family and fitness at Mineola ISD. To date, the Iron Horse Rhythm Run has donated thousands back to the community—to the Nature Preserve, MISD education foundation, the Mineola Civic Center and MISD Cross Country team.

"Dance has been wonderful to me," Riley says. She hopes to share that wonder.

"The qualities and characteristics that students learn from being in dance—you just can't teach it at home," she says. "Dance helps with self-confidence and self-image. And through performing, the kids get comfortable being in front of people." Moreover, Riley says those same qualities translate to academics and other activities like sports, speech and academic competitions.

As an example, she quotes an email sent to her from the mother of a student. The mom had commented to her daughter that she seemed so happy. The daughter replied, "It's dance, Mom. It makes me feel brave and strong and comfortable with who I am." What compelling proof: The practice of dance really can stretch a body—and mind—in multiple dimensions.

Dance Dimensions, served by Wood County Electric Cooperative, is at **1075 W. State Loop 564** in Mineola.



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Smoothing Out Winter Bills

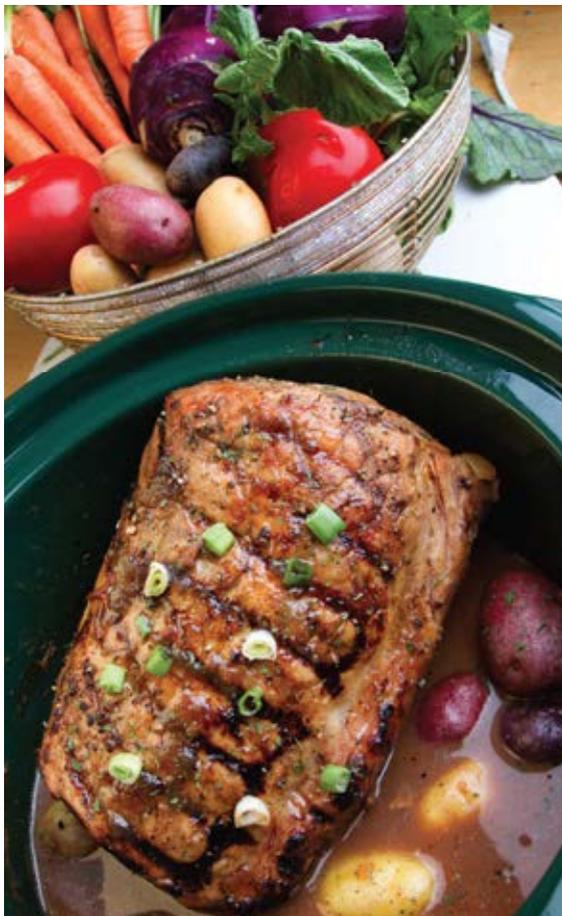
AS WE TRUDGE THROUGH WHAT CAN BE THE COLDEST AND DREARIEST PART OF WINTER, we at Wood County Electric Cooperative wish to remind our members that the season's chilly temperatures and shorter days frequently lead to increased electricity usage at home, which can cause uncomfortable spikes in electric bills. You can soften the blow by expecting at least a modest increase in power bills compared to bills from the fall, of course, and adjusting your household's monthly budget to make up the difference. But you also can employ a few strategies to smooth out those upcoming bills.

Now that the holiday blitz of parties and gatherings is mostly behind us, elaborate dinners and dishes can take a back seat. Pull out your slow cooker from the back of your pantry and put it to work. Meals made in a slow cooker or pressure cooker typically use less energy than those cooked in a conventional oven. Plus, hearty stews and braised dishes make the perfect comforting accompaniments to a cold winter's night.

Unplugging chargers that aren't charging anything is another opportunity for significant savings. Once your cell phone, tablet or other device is fully charged, unplug the charger. Otherwise, it still draws a small but measurable amount of power that adds to your bill at no benefit to you or your electronics.

A final quick tip for hedging against billing peaks: If you don't use a smart thermostat to control your home's heating and air conditioning system, install one. If that's not practical at the moment, make a habit of decreasing the temperature in your home by around 10 degrees before leaving for work in the morning and before turning in for the night. When the decrease in energy used for heating your home is sustained for eight hours, the savings really can add up.

As always, WCEC wants to partner with you in minimizing your energy spending while maximizing the value you derive from it.



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