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Sister, Sister

The McKeever sisters contribute to the arts in Sacramento and beyond, each in her own way.

By Steph Rodriguez / Photography by Tim Engle

When Nicole McKeever listens to music, she sees herself dancing. She feels her legs move instinctively to the steady rhythms and imagines the myriad ways she would interpret the music through choreography. In her words, that's just how her brain works. For McKeever, 34, movement is art, and dance in particular is a medium that inspired her to achieve her childhood dreams.

Nicole's younger sister, Natalie McKeever, also captures the art of movement, but in her own way. Instead of creating dance steps to cadence she uses photography and stop-motion film techniques to illustrate movement and transforms the ideas that dance around her mind's eye into mesmerizing video installations that she's exhibited in galleries in Sacramento and abroad.

The McKeever sisters are bonded by their love for the arts and their Irish heritage, which naturally introduced the pair to the competitive world of Irish dance. With the support of their parents, Natalie and Nicole were encouraged to explore the gamut of their individual artistic talents from a young age whether it was through dance, paint or film. What followed: the successful careers of two imaginative sisters who continue to influence the world in their own rights, but in the end it all comes back to dance.

Once Upon a Time

AT THE AGES OF 10 AND 12 YEARS OLD, the McKeever sisters were competitive Irish dancers living in New Jersey. They recall practicing their steps at home together and training for regional and national competitions.

"The summer that we signed up for lessons, 'Riverdance' came out on video, and my dad rented it and my world changed," Nicole says of the world-renowned Irish dance production. "I'd come home from school, watch it on VHS and go practice. I thought I could be (lead female dancer) Jean Butler in a year—I had no idea—but I was just obsessed with it."

For Nicole, Irish dance became her life's passion. After completing her master's degree in Irish dance performance from the University of Limerick, she landed the opportunity of her girlhood dreams. In 2008, she was cast as a dancer in "Riverdance." Recall the theatrical commercials from the '90s that announced

ever so gallantly that "Michael Flatley's Riverdance" was coming to town co-starring Jean Butler. Think of "Riverdance" as the "Hamilton" of its day.

After learning the entire show over the course of five eight-hour days, Nicole joined the latest evolution of the production. She performed in 26 countries, toured 49 states and traveled the circumference of the globe within the first six months.

"I hadn't even wrapped my head around the fact that I was good enough to get into 'Riverdance,' and that I was in it, and then all of a sudden, I'm on stage," she says. "It's literally the biggest dream I ever had come true."

But Nicole recalls a time when her path wasn't always so clear. In fact, she admits there were a few moments when she even questioned her own capabilities as a dancer.

"I knew I started dancing kind of late. I was 12 and I wanted to be a world champion so bad," she says, noting that a majority of dancers who strive to become champions often start training at 4 years old.

"But I kept dancing. I got to go to the world championships at age 19 and then I kept competing until age 25."

In 2013, Nicole moved to Sacramento so she could be on the same coast as Natalie, who lived in Santa Cruz. Their aunt and uncle own a business nearby in Rancho Cordova, so Nicole had family nearby.

Nicole compares Irish dancers to Olympic athletes because of the sport's physical demands of running slip-jigs and treble reels for one to two hours a day. This outlook rings true for the 140 students she teaches at the McKeever School of Irish Dance located in the Clara building in midtown, a school she's built over the last four years.

"I think if you go to Ireland and you travel and you get to know the people, they are friendly, they are full of joy, and then they're also very strong," Nicole says. "With Irish dance, it's joyous, it's in some ways playful, but it's also serious in the fact that we don't use our arms, so I think it really matches the spirit of the Irish people."

On a warm Monday evening in July, the distant sounds of hard dance shoes stepping in cadence to upbeat Irish ditties echoes through the halls of Clara. Nicole watches her champion-level dancers take turns running their steps in groups of two. As the music starts the dancers glide and hop across the scuffed dance floor on the balls of their feet with pointed toes and straight posture. With arms stiff at their sides, the girls move their feet in zig-zag motions and gracefully kick their legs with such control



Natalie McKeever

to the ceiling. It's a dance style that's whimsical, yet concise.

"It's a neat thing to see kids that are little yous, basically. I have dancers that are 12 and they are obsessed with Irish dance or it's a part of their identity and that's so cool," she says. "It's more than a lesson once a week to them. It's a part of their life and it happens before your eyes."

Nicole describes the students who step into class each day as just as diverse as Sacramento. The group includes every type of background, boy or girl, with ages ranging from 3 to 60.

One of Nicole's champion-level dancers, 20-year-old Moriah Payne, recalls the time a few years ago when she was searching for a coach who could help her achieve her goals of competing in the world championships. When she found the McKeever School of Irish Dance and learned Nicole's story, she felt an instant connection.

"Nicole recognizes that sometimes competition can be hard, especially if you're a really competitive person like I am. But not only does she help you to succeed and push yourself past what you think your limits are, she really opens your eyes and makes you realize that it's fun, you love doing it, and the positive outlook that she has showed me is part of what renewed my love for Irish dance," Payne says.

In 2015, Payne placed No. 8 out of hundreds of competitors at the western regional competition and qualified to compete in the world championships held in Glasgow, Scotland.

During the week, Nicole teaches her students more than just dance routines, also drawing correlations between her own accomplishments and hardships throughout her career, and she tries to recognize those within her dancers. She wants them to succeed and helps them realize their dreams just as she did.

"Sometimes I still look back and go, 'How did that happen?'"

she says. "It's like this fine line when you see the small decisions you make and your dream would have happened or not happened. And who would I be if I didn't have that?"

Digitally Poetic

Imagine wearing a helmet, hopping on a motorcycle and exploring the vast countryside. Instead, though, you're sitting in the living room and you're still wearing a helmet, but it's filled with dozens of LEDs programmed to mimic the pulse of your heart rate, and it immerses you in a visual journey. As time passes, alternate strips of lights start to develop their own rhythms designed to imitate the heavy heartbeat of a whale or the pitter-patter of a cat's ticker. Through this experience, the human heart continues to adapt to the rhythmic patterns the eyes see in real time.

This dreamy, interactive experience was Natalie's thesis when she attended UC Santa Cruz, where she earned an MFA in digital art and new media.

"A lot of my art is about atmosphere and feeling and getting people into a certain psychological state and using it to induce a meditative environment," she says.

For Natalie, 31, whether it's blurring and layering hundreds of images in Photoshop for her latest video installation or soldering a bunch of LEDs into a helmet, she admits she genuinely enjoys the cyclic cadence her creative process often follows. Art is her life's passion.

"The thing I like about digital art is that you can really experiment because you have the edit/undo button. You can try

something out and then take it away and not be so afraid about adding too many brush strokes,” she says. “A lot of my process is just an idea and then I go for it.”

She describes herself as a “techieperson,” someone who taught herself Photoshop for fun as a child and who also developed a soft spot for film and photography early on. She recalls a childhood filled with museum trips with Nicole, computers and video games, and moments when she would create stop-motion animations using clay figures with her video camera—when she wasn’t practicing her Irish dance steps with Nicole.

But, once she reached her junior year of high school, Natalie says she grew tired and a bit frustrated with her dance scores, so she wanted to focus more on art education and her love for film.

In 2007, she started exhibiting her work internationally at events like the Athens Digital Arts Festival, held in Greece, and the Women in Magmart Video Festival held in Naples, Italy. She was also a guest curator at the Jersey City Museum, in her hometown, and later taught classes at CSU San Marcos and UC Santa Cruz for a stint before her move to Sacramento in 2015 to be closer her sister.

In the two years she’s lived here, Natalie’s participated in some of the city’s most popular exhibitions, including ArtStreet, which drew more than 32,000 attendees during its three-week run early this year.

She showcased a few video projection pieces at ArtStreet. One used more than 400 photographs taken during her long drive from New Jersey to California. Every 30 minutes or so, Natalie says she would snap a photo, and she used them in an installation that documented the ebb and flow of the nearly 3,000-mile trip.

“A big chunk of my video art is all about how the road is a form of meditation. When you’re in a moving vehicle and looking at this moving landscape in front of you it sort of hypnotizes you and gets you into a real introspective state of mind,” she says.

Her follow-up to ArtStreet was a 30-second stop-motion animation titled “Skylight” for the LED video tower inside Arden Fair mall. For “Skylight,” she cut out different textures and colors from fashion magazines and arranged the triangular snippets into a dancing mosaic inspired by the different times of day. Shades of blue and images of clouds fluidly transform into orange and gold, before a deep navy sky with twinkling stars ripples across the 40-foot tower.

But, it’s her latest work with “Beacon: Sacramento,” a 10-week, rotating video projection installation where artists create pieces inspired by topics like “consent,” “migration” and “America,” that left a lasting impression on filmmaker, artist and “Beacon” curator Jessa Ciel.

Ciel says it was Natalie’s hypnotic video projections of road trips at ArtStreet that initially caught her eye, so when her name surfaced as an artist interested in representing the “water” topic



Nicole McKeever

for “Beacon,” Ciel knew she had found the right woman to tackle the theme.

“I looked at Natalie’s entire portfolio and I really loved the evolution of her work. Her ‘road’ piece for ArtStreet was very lyrical and it was very meditative to me,” Ciel says. “What I thought was really interesting about her ‘water’ piece was that it was much more kinesthetic. It was much more rhythmic and it reminded me of the body. I really loved how she used water to relate to physical movement and physical sensations in the body.”

Natalie’s fingerprint on Sacramento’s art scene is one that immerses the viewer in texture, color and light and is brought to life like digital poetry. But when she’s not manipulating images or piecing together another hypnotic visual, she enjoys tapping into her inner filmmaker by using the love for cinematography to highlight an art form she’s quite familiar with at the McKeever School of Irish Dance. Nicole says Natalie has assisted in her adult classes and with champion-level dancers for the past two years and is slowly “coming out of dance retirement.”

“I did leave dance, but not with the best feeling about it, even though I really enjoyed my time doing it in the past. At the very end, I was just frustrated and so it’s nice to rewrite that with Nicole’s partnership,” Natalie says. “She’s a really great teacher who’s learned so much more from what we were taught as kids. It’s been really cool to come back and understand how much work goes into each movement.” ❧