

Holy Cross Takes the Floor

Television dance shows are all the rage these days, but at Holy Cross, students have been taking star turns for years. BY JODY GARLOCK

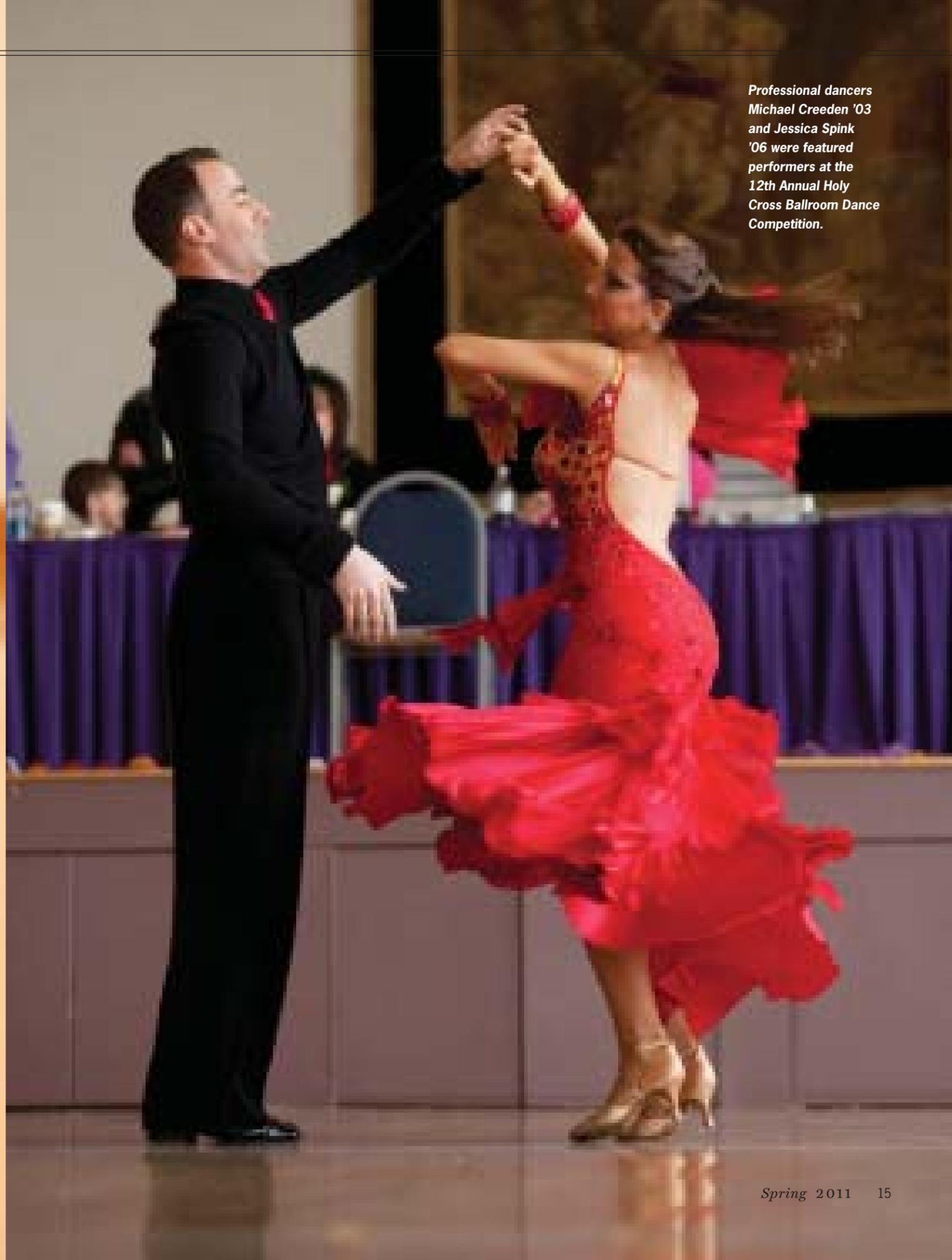
MICHAEL CREEDEN '03 and Jessica Spink '06 waltz across the gleaming wood floor, her ruffled red dress flouncing with every twirl, and her rhinestone bracelets glinting in the light. Arms stretched, back straight, smile on, Creeden leads Spink through a potential bumper-car maze of fellow dancers, making it look effortless.

Call them the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers of Holy Cross fame. After fox-trotting and tangoing around the Hogan Campus Center ballroom as students, the Holy Cross alumni parlayed dance into a way of life. By day, they're career-minded professionals—Spink works in fundraising at Harvard University, and Creeden is a supervisor at a Waltham, Mass., advertising agency. But nights and weekends they're

professional ballroom dancers, either fine-tuning their sequences in a studio or trying to catch judges' attention with every spin, dip and double reverse turn.

"It's a Clark Kent/Superman thing," Creeden says. "I can wear one hat during the day and then shut off my work and turn into Dance Mike. I put on my dance shoes and just express myself."

Welcome to ballroom dance, a heady mixture of social graces, sport and pageantry. Spink and Creeden are among the hundreds of Holy Cross students who learned their smooth moves through the College's ballroom dance club and competitive dance team. While it may not have the mainstream recognition of varsity athletics, ballroom dance is one



Professional dancers Michael Creeden '03 and Jessica Spink '06 were featured performers at the 12th Annual Holy Cross Ballroom Dance Competition.

of Holy Cross' 24 "club sports"—groups that compete against other colleges, unlike intramurals where competitions are among same-school teams.

Like other students, Spink and Creeden stumbled upon ballroom dancing as a cocurricular offering. Creeden initially joined for the socializing ("Any chance to meet girls was something I was willing to throw my hat into the ring for," he jokes). Spink, who had taken jazz and ballet as a teen, wanted to try a type of dance she wasn't familiar with. "I remember telling my mom about it, and she was like, 'People ballroom dance in college?'" she recalls.

Indeed, ballroom—once a social glue—seems an unlikely fit for college students. When Anna Philips Mammen '93 struck on the idea for a ballroom club in 1990, she wasn't sure where it would lead. "It was really just to learn to dance, meet people and have fun," says Mammen, who co-founded the club with her roommate, Karen Wozniak '93.

It evolved into much more. The ballroom team now competes against other colleges and universities, including Yale, Brown and Tufts. The club also hosts charitable events and community-minded programs. "Dancing with the Holy Cross Stars" events have raised money to help hurricane-ravaged New Orleans and people with autism, and dancers who have learned to sign lead a weekly "Deafinitely Ballroom" session for members in the deaf community in the Worcester area.

Kristine Cyr Goodwin, associate dean for student life, says the ballroom club is an example of how Holy Cross encourages students to explore their passions and form organizations that are meaningful to them. "These groups allow students to develop self-esteem and make powerful connections," she says.

Mammen and Wozniak remember going before deans and the Student Government Association, and scrambling to get the proper paperwork and students' signatures to make the club official. "It's amazing to see how far it's gone," says Mammen, who now lives in Plano, Texas.

In the Ballroom

For 20 years, the Hogan Campus Center ballroom has been the place to be on Monday nights. Students—some in jeans and sneakers, others in dance garb and heels with suede-covered soles—split into rows of leaders and followers as they practice steps to the sound of big-band music.

The atmosphere is contagious. Grant Greeley '11 was drawn in on his way to a 7 p.m. meeting during his second year. "I ended up following the sound of the music to the ballroom, where I found beautiful dancers doing what looked almost Disneyesque," he says. "All I could think was, 'Gosh, that looks fantastic.'"

A week later, he was one of the newbies, learning basic moves like the box step, sailor shuffle and chicken walk. Today, he's a team captain, dances at the advanced level and counts the Lindy Hop as his favorite dance.

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*—Ballroom dance club co-founder
Anna Philips Mammen '93*

love, a new passion," says Gary Jacobik, who, along with his one-time dance partner Pat Connolly, has coached the students for the entire two decades.

The dancers are nothing if not passionate. Every fall during the College's Cocurricular Extravaganza—a spirited fest where clubs woo new members—dancers commandeer the Hogan Campus Center stage, proudly strutting their stuff. "We really try to promote the idea that anybody can learn ballroom," says Samantha Hulihan '13, a team captain who works dancing in between classes and varsity swim meets and practices. "Once you know how to do it, you can probably do it for the rest of your life."

During the school year, team members are always on the lookout for a good hard floor—the basement of a residence hall or the balcony of the science library—to practice a few steps with their partner. They've also been known to break into a dance in Kimball Dining Hall. "People look at us like we're complete and total aliens," Greeley says. "Ballroom definitely isn't mainstream yet, but it is getting more popular."

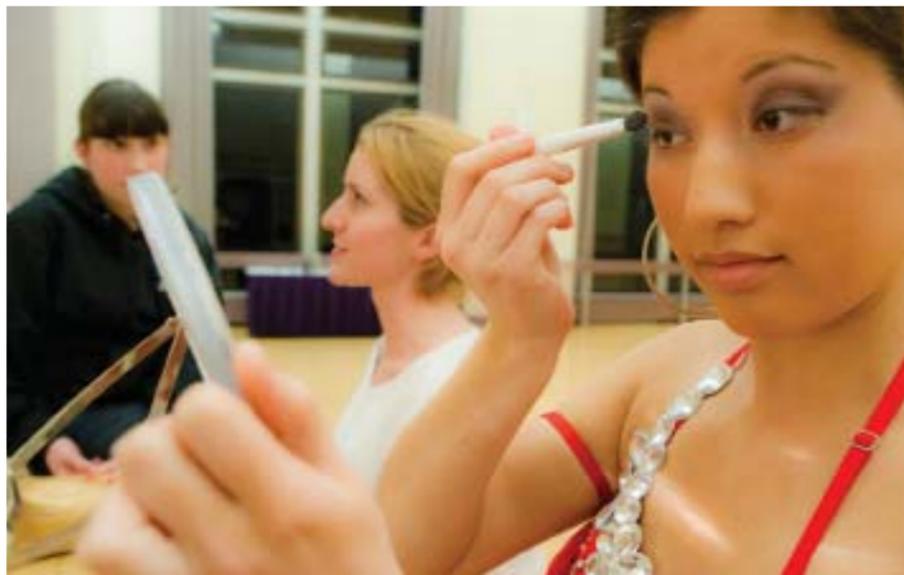
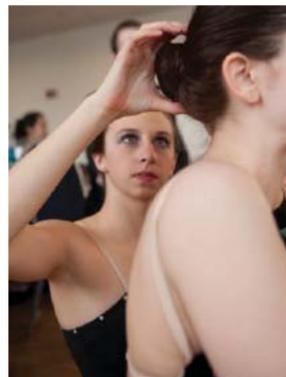
This year, 40 students have been attending practices, about 14 of whom compete on the team. Though the numbers fluctuate from year to year, there's been one constant: Ballroom is strictly grassroots. Students handle virtually everything—rounding up club dues to pay instructors, figuring out the logistics of traveling to competitions and hosting an annual dance competition, to name a few tasks.

"Clubs like these are terrific opportunities in terms of leadership," says Josh Meyer, director of recreation, intramurals and club sports.

Faculty adviser Jamie Herrick, the College's director of laboratory and studio safety, sees that leadership firsthand. "They're so independent that I just get to sit back and enjoy the events they put on," she says.

Connolly marvels at the students' ability to juggle so many responsibilities. "I'm not sure they're even completely aware of what strong leadership skills they develop," she says.

Their commitment and multitasking skills come to the fore when competition season is in full swing. By 4 a.m. on a wintry Saturday, girls are pulling their hair into tight buns and French twists and dousing it with hairspray so it survives the long day. By 5 a.m., the team hits the road. Once at the



Holy Cross dancers at the Feb. 27 competition included Kallen Bakas '12 (top left), Chelesea Jenkins '13 and Kibbs Fortilus '13 (top right); Samantha Hulihan '13 (fixing hair for Courtney Lyons '12), Bakas with Lauren Dy '13, Josh Rodriguez '10 with Kelsey Ruescher '10, and Andrew Retallick '14 with Megan Whitacre '14 (middle row from left). Team members prep for competition (left).

venue, there's a scramble to get into dance regalia—dresses, heels and lots of makeup for the women and black pants and dress shirts for the men.

Throughout the day, team members cheer on one another while patiently waiting to hear their numbers called back so they can advance to the next round. By early evening, when other teams are packing up, the Holy Cross dancers huddle for Ninja, a hand-slap game that's their favorite. The laughter usually attracts attention, and the circle widens to welcome students from other teams. It's a reflection of the Holy Cross team in general: While they love to compete, they're equally passionate about the camaraderie.

"It's like a family," Jacobik says. "They make such a great group of friends—people they'll keep track of lifelong."

The Pros Take the Floor

Creeden and Spink, who have been dancing together competitively since 2002, point to the bond they formed at Holy Cross with helping them rise through the amateur levels. The winners of numerous championships, they were one of the Northeast's top amateur couples in American Smooth, their chosen dance style that encompasses the waltz, fox-trot, tango and Viennese waltz. Both having a competitive side,

they decided to take the next step by turning professional this past August.

"We felt that by putting ourselves among people who are better than us, it will push us to get even better," Spink says.

In February—just six months after turning pro—they were elated to finish second in the Professional Rising Star American Smooth at the 2011 Maryland DanceSport Championships in Bethesda. "As amateurs we were at the top of the food chain, but as professionals it's a totally different beast," Creeden says. "The speed is tenfold what we're used to. You go from always making the final round to potentially not making the second round or even getting noticed. You learn to take your lumps."

Learning, in fact, is a big part of the ballroom experience. "Ballroom dance exercises the mind," says Goodwin. "For students, it's about building relationships, organizing events and being a part of a team. They're also learning the ability to understand another person, which is fantastic."

Confidence, cooperation, teamwork, communication skills, physical fitness—even good posture—are among the life lessons students and coaches point to. "So much of what they learn through ballroom carries over into the rest of their lives," Jacobik says.



Jive Queen

When Colleen Curran '11 spent her third year at Oxford University as part of the Holy Cross Study Abroad program, she never imagined she would end up dancing in the famed ballroom of Blackpool Tower, England's Eiffel Tower-inspired attraction. But her academic adventure took an

unexpected twist when, during an audition for the Oxford dance team, a coach pulled her aside and said, "You're talented, and we're going to work on you to make you a champion."

Curran, a Georgia native double-majoring in English and medieval studies and co-chair of the ballroom club and team, spent her free time honing classics like the waltz and the heart-pumping jive, in which she excels. There were private lessons in London and competitions with the Oxford team that won the British national collegiate competition. "I loved every minute," Curran says.

Neil Kelly, a ballroom champion and the coach who took her under his wing, kept up with his jive prodigy upon Curran's return to Worcester. In preparation for a return trip to England to compete in a prestigious national championship, the dedicated

dancer strapped five-pound weights around each ankle to improve her foot speed. Her hard work paid off this past November when she placed second in the Latin division at the competition in Blackpool's majestic old ballroom. "I was over the moon," she says.

Curran's passion for ballroom came out of the blue (she took Irish step and tap as a girl), but now it's a part of her. She's considering graduate school, perhaps at Oxford, so she can rejoin the team. "I'm not ready to turn professional, but I do want to spend as much time as I can dancing," she says.

"I would have laughed if someone had told me during my first year that this is what I'd be doing now," Curran continues. "I planned to join the mock trial team, and I imagined myself as a high-powered lawyer. It's a very different girl who is graduating."



Alicia Peracchia '12 and Kallen Bakas '12 placed sixth overall in the Bronze Swing event at the competition.



PHOTO BY MATTHEW ATANIAN

Spink and Creeden practice 10 hours a week at the SuperShag Dance Studios in Waltham, Mass.

Both Spink and Creeden say ballroom has even helped them get noticed in the work world. When Spink applied for the Harvard job upon graduation, the interviewer holding her resume mentioned, “You do something that I always wanted to do—ballroom dancing.” Both have had co-workers and managers at work take an interest in their unique pastime. “People will stop me and say, ‘I wish I could do that,’” Creeden says. “It’s definitely an ice breaker.”

For each dancer personally, though, ballroom has a deeper pull. “It brings peace into my life,” Creeden says.

Greeley has a similar feeling. “Very few things just make the world go quiet, but when you’re out on the dance floor, feeling the music and sharing something special with your partner, the world just disappears,” he says.

The Big Day

On a snowy Sunday in February, the Hogan Campus Center ballroom is a sea of color as more than 300 students in sequined dresses and white-tie attire gather for the 12th Annual Holy Cross Ballroom Dance Competition. Parents and friends fill chairs set up under the soaring windows that offer broad views of the campus and the Worcester skyline. For the Holy Cross dancers, the much-anticipated event is a time to show off their hospitality in a *bona fide* ballroom rather than

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—Grant Greeley ’11

a gymnasium, where other colleges tend to hold competitions.

“It’s magical,” says Cecilia Carlowicz ’12, one of the chairs of the ballroom club and team who would go on to place first in American rumba this day. “It’s such a beautiful venue. It definitely gives a different feel to the competition.”

For Jacobik, the event’s emcee, and Connolly, a judge, the enthusiasm and strong turnout despite the bad weather is the ultimate reward for 20 years of dedication to the Holy Cross dancers. “We had always wanted to get younger people involved in ballroom dance and we’re so happy that it evolved into the club it is today,” Connolly says.

For Creeden and Spink it’s a reunion of sorts. They’ve

reunited with the coaches who inspired them, and returned to the maple-floor ballroom that started it all, this time as performers in a professional showcase. “To return here as changed dancers now competing in the professional ranks is humbling to say the least,” Creeden says.

The day brings back memories of the couple’s Holy Cross years. Spink recalls the time she partnered with College President Rev. Michael C. McFarland, S.J., for a tango in the first-ever “Dancing with the Holy Cross Stars” event. “I was beyond impressed that he would take time out of his busy schedule to try something that was certainly out of his comfort zone,” Spink says. “In practicing and dancing with him, I quickly learned something for which I will always admire and respect him: He is the kind of person who has a sincere interest in you as a person. He asked questions about me, my classes, my dancing—and he really wanted to hear the answers. He is so committed to the students at Holy Cross.

“That’s one of the things I love about dance—I meet so many wonderful people who I would not know otherwise,” she continues. “Partner dancing by definition requires interaction. It’s not something meant to isolate. We’re so grateful to have had the experience at Holy Cross and feel fortunate that it’s taken us so many wonderful places.”

The pride goes both ways. As Jacobik finishes introducing the couple, he ends with a big “Welcome home!” Students crowd around the dance floor’s perimeter to soak in every step and cheer loudly as Spink and Creeden glide by.

After a dreamy Viennese waltz, Spink changes into a coral-color halter dress with fiery rhinestones. Creeden, knowing his place is to frame the woman, stays dressed head-to-toe in stretchy black for all four of their dances. As they prepare to take the floor for their final number—a flirty fox-trot—they quickly glance at each other. Then, as they often do when they’re in the on-deck spot at competitions, they nod as Creeden quietly says, “OK, let’s have fun!”

By the time the music ends, the students and crowd are on their feet, giving a rousing ovation to their Holy Cross dance heroes. Spink and Creeden are equally inspired. “The whole day has been one touching moment after another, thinking about where we began, where we are, and where we’re going,” Spink says. “What a wonderful feeling to think that we were perhaps able to say to others through our dancing, ‘We made it here, and you can too!’”

Jody Garlock, an Iowa-based freelancer, writes and edits for various national magazines, trade association publications and book publishers on topics ranging from home design to business.

Go behind the scenes as the Holy Cross ballroom dance team preps and primps for the big competition. Our camera caught every sequin and sashay—and even a few tips—at holycross.edu/magazine. (Click on Web Exclusives.)

The Cocurricular Experience at Holy Cross

The Holy Cross ballroom dance club is one of dozens of student-led groups on campus. And while other schools call these groups “extracurriculars,” Holy Cross refers to them as “cocurriculars,” indicating the importance the College places on learning opportunities outside the classroom.

Kristine Cyr Goodwin, associate dean for student life in the Office of Student Affairs, notes that cocurriculars are really more than “just fun.” In fact, she says, they have great academic value. “Students’ brains don’t just turn off when they are out of the classroom. They are always learning, always figuring out who they are and what they’re going to be,” Goodwin notes. “Learning happens everywhere.”

Students are first exposed to the College’s array of cocurriculars through the Gateways orientation program, then through the unique first-year living and learning program called Montserrat, notes Vice President for Student Affairs and Dean of Students Jacqueline Peterson. “Then there are more than 100 active clubs and organizations—very impressive for a school of our size—which stand out because they are based on student interests,” she adds. “All of this, combined with the service and athletic opportunities, offers our students a multidimensional cocurricular experience that is second to none.”

With so many offerings, sometimes the students’ most important growth experiences come from learning when to say “no.”

“Much of what we do as student affairs educators is to provide guidance to students on making decisions that support healthy living,” Peterson explains, “which includes finding the right balance of responsibilities and activities.”

Peterson smiles when recalling her own turn with the ballroom club as a participant in its “Dancing with the Holy Cross Stars” event. “The students in the club were fantastic teachers whose support and patience I very much appreciated,” Peterson says. “And, they were able to make even a rhythmically challenged person like me look good on the dance floor.”