

# Style

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### *Cotillion: The lasting waltz*

By Karen Heller



Jon D. Williams III has flown in to Philadelphia from Denver, Salt Lake and Corpus Christi to teach the fine art of shaking hands, fetching refreshments and, perhaps most important, not looking real stupid when you cha-cha.

“When you dance, you want to look cool, you don’t want to look goofy,” he says to a gussied-up gaggle of fifth and sixth graders.

“Where is the waltz from? I’ll give you a hint. This one is a *Viennese Waltz*,” says Williams, a boyishly handsome 45.

“Vietnam?” one boy in an oversized blazer guesses.

“France?” another shrugs.

Tonight is Ladies’ Choice at the Main Line

Cotillion. So when Williams announces, “Ladies, choose your partners,” the girls race across the room in their patent leathers with such fervor to pluck their partners it seems as if all of Bryn Mawr College’s stately Thomas Hall might list to port.

Yes, they still have dancing classes on the Main Line. Demand remains so great there are actually two dancing classes: the Jon D. Williams Main Line Cotillion held at Bryn Mawr College, known as the Thursday class, and the Mrs. Kendall Chew’s Tuesday evening program at the Merion Cricket Club.

Williams Main Line Cotillion has 200 children, beginning with third graders. In 1994, it is a strange though lovely sight to observe so many children dressed in fancy dresses and brass-buttoned blazers getting down, as it were, to James Brown on the Main

Line, to see white gloves on school girls when even the most immutable of grandmothers have long abandoned them.

Cotillions are Williams' business. He runs one of the most established programs in the United States, founded over four decades ago: the Jon D. Williams Cotillions, launched by his father and mother who still instruct and were personally trained by Arthur Murray and Fred Astaire. His mother, Vivian, was one of Fred Astaire's most formidable dance partners. The Williams program operates 36 cotillions, in 25 cities, with 8 in Denver alone. Williams spends more of his time in airplanes than on the dance floor; he tries to attend many of his programs, and hopes to make it to all six dances this season on the Main Line. And his cotillions are not just in places where one expects the ancient lucre to be. Next year, the program plans to go into Casper, Wyoming, and to play in Peoria.

The Williams classes help teach new money to be comfortable with the old, for once-shunned minorities to feel at ease with those people who have resided on the Main Line forever. To this end, Williams' program is open to all, attracting children from the third to eighth grades; admittance is first-come, first-served, and waiting lists in some communities extend to the end of the century. In a democracy, everyone is entitled to be groomed as an aristocrat. But it isn't always easy.



### *White Gloves and Main Line Party Manners*

For the wealthy and entitled, those whose names have long been etched in the Social Register or on the Merion Cricket Club's wooden plaques, the Main Line has never been a straight line, but more a series of closed circles.

Clubs exist not only to embrace the chosen but to exclude the multitude. Neighbors live next to each other for a generation, exchanging pleasantries but

never a dinner invitation. Nuances are subtle and absolute.



### *Tripping the Light Fantastic on the Main Line*

For many years, children were invited to join cotillions based on whom their parents knew. This was simply the way things were done.

But as schools opened their portals, and communities long bound by bloodlines became restricted solely by assets, children were being hurt, and their parents were getting angry.

Every few Tuesdays during the social season, the Merion Cricket Club is host to those children invited by Mrs. Kendall Chew. She declines to explain her admissions policy. "We are speaking of the welfare of young children," Mrs. Chew says. "We're very low-key, that's all I can say. We've been around for a long, long time and we've never given interviews."

At Chew's Merion Cricket Tuesday program, one mother recalls, her daughter would feel physically ill as she watched her closest friends change into fancy dresses at school while she was just heading home.

"The old Main Line families and their friends were the only ones who could attend," says Elba Crane, whose daughters were not interested in attending. "Imagine that small-class environment at the Merion Cricket. Children would be in car pools and they would talk about it. It was terrible."

Children did not know why they were excluded, and their parents had a hard time explaining. The reasons why some children were asked, and others were not, were as layered and difficult to decode as the social webbing in a Henry James novel.

While both groups say there are no systematic racial or religious restrictions, and both groups have non-WASP members, the social distinctions of the Main Line are apparent. Some Jewish boys were

invited to the Chew's Merion Cricket group, but then boys are not as interested in dancing class and are usually underrepresented. A few Jewish girls were sent invitations and some Protestant girls were not asked.

Tensions became so strained at the Shipley School that parents brought it to the attention of headmaster Steven S. Piltch. Last year, he asked both groups if they would send invitations to every Shipley student in the third to eighth grades for this season. Williams at the Main Line Cotillion complied. Mrs. Chew at the Merion Cricket Club did not.

Five years ago, when Linda Waltman's older daughter, Meredith, was in the fourth grade at Shipley, "all her little friends were in their party clothes and she didn't know why she wasn't invited," Waltman recalls. She asked around and found that children were "hand-chosen." A year later, Meredith received her invitation.

This season, Waltman's fifth-grade daughter, Lindsey, was asked to Chew's Merion Cricket program -- as are all younger siblings of those accepted -- and she declined. "I gave her the choice, and she wanted to go to Williams Main Line Cotillion because all of her friends were included," Waltman says. "I was really proud of her."



### *Perfect Poise & Posture*

Mary Hanna, a fifth grader at the Shipley School, switched this year from Chew's Tuesday group to the Williams Thursday group. "I thought the Merion Cricket Club was prejudiced toward different people," the 11-year-old says. "I asked my friends if they were invited and some of them were, but some of them weren't. Maybe five were invited out of 20. None of my black friends were invited and only a few of the Jewish ones."

Her mother, Rosemary Hanna, says she almost cried when Mary announced her decision: "The most important lesson has already been learned."

The venerable Mrs. Brent Harrison Farber, the doyenne of Main Line dancing, sits in the communal room of her elegant retirement home, her bracelet adorned with charms marking the birth of each grandchild chiming as she sips coffee from white bone china. She speaks rapidly, in that elegant, somewhat English way that people don't anymore and only did once born into the downy upper strata of society.



### *"May I Serve You....?"*

Mrs. Farber speaks her mind, and is at once formidable and self-deprecating. Myrna Loy might have played her in the movies - if she could have had Eve Arden's lemon-lozenge personality.

"Oh, you should have seen me when I was young. I was lovely. I was a little more popular than the other girls," she says. "I've always been bossy." She laughs at that, a nice, low guttural laugh.

Mrs. Faber ran WADA (the Wednesday Afternoon Dance Association) and JDA (the Junior Dance Assembly) for 20 years in Philadelphia and Wilmington. For 28 years before that in her native Baltimore, she ran programs at five different clubs. She ruled with an iron glove and a mighty bell, and knew everyone.

In Baltimore, the old-money Protestants were taught at one club, the new money at another, and the Jewish children at a third. When Mrs. Farber came here, she didn't really have rules. Political correctness was not in flower. Friends invited friends. She recalls Jewish children being in some classes. Ten years ago, a black child enrolled. She thought there might be a

commotion among the other parents, but it was fine with them. The child came for one season.

Recently, Mrs. Farber found she was not feeling quite as fit, and sometimes suffered from dizziness -- "though never on the dance floor, mind you" -- and thought of hanging up her dancing shoes.

Then along came Williams, the son of her former dancing teacher. Three seasons ago, the Main Line Cotillion was launched. Mrs. Farber continues as the chair, which means she does all the paperwork. When Williams asked her to send out 1,000 invitations as part of the arrangement with the Shipley School's Piltch, Mrs. Farber "thought my hair would curl" but she did it, and the parents of 200 children accepted and paid the \$120 per child for six classes, divided by grades. About one-fourth of the enrollment is Jewish, one child is black, one is Latino.

Each Thursday during the social season, Mrs. Farber extends a gloved hand to all the students as they bound up the steps for the first class. "He's scared to death of me," Mrs. Farber says of Williams, but he is clearly in charge and does as he pleases.

Williams leads with a microphone instead of Mrs. Farber's bell. Instead of punch, cola is served. The music has its share of waltzes and polkas, but also rock and country. Williams is a softie, tolerant like a camp counselor, while Mrs. Farber has the demeanor of a regiment colonel.

On this night, as Williams teaches, Mrs. Farber is the very model of rectitude, but the cotillion is no longer hers.

"You should have seen the class when I did it," says Mrs. Farber, shaking her head, smiling but somewhat unsettled. "It was something."

And then she leaves shortly after class has begun.

Tiffany Bradley is 10, a poised and beautiful Shipley fifth grader. She sits after class, her hair pulled back, her gloves still on, with her good friends and classmates Elizabeth Borneman and Tara Bonsall. "I wanted to come. It sounded like fun," says Tiffany, the only black child in her cotillion class. "I learned some new dances."

Karen Isen is Jewish and never knew about cotillions when she was a child. "I think it's wonderful. I wish I'd had it." Her two children are enrolled in the cotillion; Brian, a sixth grader at Episcopal, is now in his fourth year, something of a record for the boys, who rarely let a cotillion get in the way of a soccer game.

"I think it teaches girls and boys to respect one another," says Isen, a sartorial anachronism in a tight short-skirted suit and her white gloves. It's teaching

them presence, how to handle the opposite sex, good eye contact, poise."

During the break, Williams says: "The problem you had in the past was basically a few uninformed parents. It was how they grew up. Today as teachers and parents, we have a responsibility to teach our young people that it's not a matter of where you are from but where you are going, and how you conduct yourself in the process."

With that, he crosses the long hall to the dance floor, cranks up the Village People and teaches his young charges the Slide.

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