



The More Things Change,  
The More They Stay the Same.



The footwork that defines Cotillion remains solid, even as music and social pressures change.

By HEATHER BIEN | Photography by TYLER DARDEN



"Walk, walk, side, together," calls out a dance instructor. A middle school girl dons petite white gloves while the boy across from her fidgets with his tie. The two pair off, slightly unsure as the music starts.



It's a Friday night at Cotillion, and students—all formally dressed—are learning the foxtrot while navigating the complexities of the preteen years and participating in a century-old tradition. Anyone who's been through Cotillion remembers it vividly. The children check in, the boys line up on one side of the wall, the girls on the other. And, for the savvy among them, they'll attempt to carefully count out just the right spot to end up paired with their crush.

Cotillion is alive and well in Richmond, and it's more than just an old-fashioned dance. But, on the exterior, teaching children to waltz and navigate a receiving line could seem like a lost cause when the latest TikTok choreography is calling and social graces seem forgotten.

Christopher Hopkins, now a current junior assistant at the Junior Assembly Cotillion at the downtown Woman's Club—for years known as "Miss Donnan's"—was initially one of those reluctant students. His mother fell in love with ballroom dancing in college, and she imagined her son similarly waltzing across the dance floor. But his ideal Friday night would have involved watching movies, not learning the jitterbug.

Yet, for hundreds of middle and high schoolers like Hopkins—whether willingly or unwillingly—their annual social calendar is punctuated by eight dances a year. Here, they'll gather, in all their youthful awkwardness, figuring out both their own two feet, as well as how to interact with others. "Where confidence and manners matter" is the Junior Assembly Cotillion's motto.

### An Experience to Remember

The season will build up to one of the most formal events of the year, the December Holly Ball, a festive and longstanding tradition. For many, it's a child's first exposure to the pomp and circumstance of a formal event. Even for those who begrudgingly attend, there's something about the magic of that first tailored suit or sparkly dress. It's an experience they'll remember—even if they're not yet willing to admit it.

For that reason, as Laura Lenke Brown, co-owner of Town & Country Cotillion says, "We're lucky that, in Richmond, this is built into the social fabric."

We're lucky, because this isn't standard social operating procedure everywhere. Town & Country Cotillion parent Vyana Lafland grew up in Maine, a world away from white gloves and curtsies. "Coming from the North, I hadn't heard of Cotillion," she says. "It was a foreign concept. It reminded me of Southern traditions and debutantes."

But, she thought, it's good to know how to dance, and at the urging of her good friend Suzanne Moncure Davidson, one of the co-owners of Town & Country, she enrolled her children. "Making sure they had the right clothes even took a bit of practice at the beginning," laughs Lafland.

Amidst practicing the foxtrot and the lindy hop,

“  
Our goal is to help children come out of their social shells. And, a lot of times, we learn from them.”

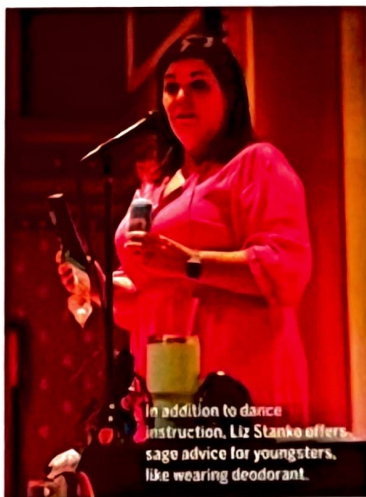
—Liz Stanko, Junior Assembly Cotillion

Lafland was pleasantly surprised by how much her three children got out of Cotillion. They had no preconceived notions of Southern traditions. "They went because their friends were going," she admits. "Plus, there's ice cream afterwards."

### Teaching Confidence

For Brown, on the other hand, she was raised into Cotillion. In 1961, her mother, Nancy Butcher Leake and three friends started Town & Country at the Tuckahoe Woman's Club. Coming back and eventually taking over ownership was an exercise in comforting consistency. "It wasn't completely different at all, and it still isn't," Brown says. "That's what I love most about it."

While the music has two-stepped into the 21st century thanks to the input of high school-age assistants, Brown explains that the protocol for the evenings has remained largely the same. As the children take their places to learn dances like the rumba, Brown remarks, "We fully understand that they're not going to do the foxtrot at a school dance, but we teach them the confidence to stand opposite another person and feel comfortable, and, every once in a while, you'll see a child where the rhythm and the steps just click."



In addition to dance instruction, Liz Stanko offers sage advice for youngsters, like wearing deodorant.



Junior Assembly Cotillion dance instructor Greg Thorpe with Sophomore junior assistant Madeleine Rose.

### A Fun, Safe Space

Downtown at the Woman's Club, Liz Stanko, owner of the Junior Assembly Cotillion, believes that evolution is as critical as honoring the past. The Junior Assembly Cotillion is the oldest Cotillion in Virginia and, as far as Stanko can determine, it may also be the oldest in the country. Her own mother, Susan Norton, took over in 1984, and Stanko came into the fold in 2008. She approaches her role with a reverence for tradition.

But as a mother of college-age children, she realizes life is changing, and Cotillion must change, too. "Our goal is to help children come out of their social shells," she says. "And, a lot of times, we learn from them."

On a Friday night, when Cotillion is over and all the children have gone home, Stanko reflects on the evening. "You never know what these kids come to Cotillion with," she says as the lights overhead dim. "This could be the bright spot in their week, and we want to be that safe, fun space for them."

### The Next Generation

Geoff Gasperini, whose children are now learning to dance from Greg Thorpe, the same Junior Assembly Cotillion dance instructor he learned from decades ago, commends the tradition. "There are no screens, no 'virtual' interactions," he says. "Cotillion encourages them to get dressed up for an evening out, meet friends and peers face to face, practice social graces, and learn skills they can take with them for life."

"For my generation, it's a place to form connections without technology," says Christopher Hopkins. "I had a hard time with talking to others one on one, and now I am able to talk with just about anyone. And I also get to take some pretty cool dance moves with me." JuniorAssemblyCotillion.com, TownAndCountryCotillion.com

Heather Bien, a Virginia- and D.C.-based writer, looks for the intersection of tradition, history, and home. Her work has appeared in Apartment Therapy, Martha Stewart Weddings, and more.

Richmond's Junior Assembly stays hip with themed cotillions. Like this recent Rock, Roll & Remember dance. Name left to right: Top row: Lucy Croston, Jonathan 'JJ' Withson, Eli Huggins, Maggie Pierch, Chayla Doss, Haynes Johnson. Middle row: Digi Martrader, Bennett Carly, Gwen Boyd, Michael Dewey, Mary Bo Gutchman, Youssif Samdani. Bottom row: Deacon Whitford, Ueal Granderson, Ben Ensig, Genevieve Gasperini, Emily Murray.