from Irish step dancers to Irish classes, there is a broad interest in all things Irish at CUA. Some might even call it a resurgence of Irish culture on campus.

There’s a buzz in the food court of the Edward J. Pryzbyla University Center. Although food is no longer being served for the night, some students occupy several tables; others stand around, waiting for the show to start.

Students Katie Kilner and Allison Wetterau — outfitted in red dresses, black tights, and white bows and capes — introduce the Celtic Cardinals, Catholic University’s Irish step dancing team.

“We’re about to perform our routines for our big competition this weekend against eight different colleges. And we’re going to win,” says Cardinals, Catholic University’s Irish step dancing team.

Eight of the team’s dancers take the stage. When they begin to move, their backs are straight and the top half of their bodies rigid. But their legs and feet move in a rapid rhythm. The loud echo of their shoes belies their graceful and precise steps. The audience claps along to the beat of the Irish music coming from the speaker. A student moves through the crowd with a basket, collecting money.

That money offsets the cost of a trip to the Intercollegiate Irish Dance Festival held a few days later, Nov. 16, at Villanova University in Pennsylvania. Villanova advertised it as the first-ever intercollegiate Irish dance competition in North America.

Wetterauw, a junior media studies major from Danien, Conn., is one of the leaders of the Celtic Cardinals and vice president of the CUA Gaels, Catholic University’s Irish culture student organization. Her father was an accomplished Irish step dancer.

“We put Catholic University on a list of schools Irish step dancers might look at,” Wetterauw says. “We hope our showing will help attract more Irish dancers to our school.”

Just a few years ago, CUA wouldn’t have had a team to send to the competition. The CUA Gaels and the Celtic Cardinals were founded in the fall of 2011, thanks to Courtney Costello (B.S.B.A. 2013) and James Polis (B.S.B.A. 2013).

In the United States, more than 34 million Americans claim Irish heritage. Costello and Polis are among them. Costello arrived on campus as a well-trained Irish step dancer. She began dancing at the age of 4 with training from her mother, whose father came to the United States from Ireland. She started performing informally on campus with other dancers until she and Polis, who has Irish roots on his father’s side, put together a proposal to the Office of Campus Activities for an Irish culture student organization.

They named themselves the CUA Gaels after an amateur Irish sports club in Washington, D.C. The group started with just a few members. Wetterauw and Costello were the group’s only dancers. Now, the Gaels’ roster includes dozens of students, some who claim Irish ancestry as well as those who don’t. Approximately 20 students, including a couple of men, practice with the Celtic Cardinals. Together, the CUA Gaels and Celtic Cardinals host movie screenings, Luck of the Irish casino nights, and dance performances throughout the year.

To Costello and Wetterauw, the allure of the dancers can be attributed to the unique style of Irish dance.

“People, especially those who aren’t Irish, are intrigued by it.”

“Religion creates a bridge between their past and present.”