

Sharing the joy of dance.

I remember the first day that I did any dancing. It was the Saturday of Labor Day Weekend, 1997, and I was at a Cajun music festival near my home in Connecticut. I had divorced the previous spring at the age of 29 and several friends suggested that I attend the festival as a way to meet people and maybe even have a fun time. I lived nearby and decided to go, what did I have to lose, right?

What a weekend it was! The music was great and I took workshop after workshop learning various forms of Cajun and Zydeco dance. The sun shone down on us during the day and even dancing under the tents was hot. The temperature didn't cool down until after dark, but the dancing inside the barn kept everyone hot and sweaty. Women smiled and were happy to dance with me, even though I know (now) that I was not good. But it was a great weekend.

I danced Cajun for a year, then I did East Coast Swing for another year before moving into Lindy Hop. I thought that I was good, I even taught lessons at a couple of parties that I went to. I remember the look of joy on my partners faces as I lead them through a thoroughly enjoyable dance. I remember hearing guys say that they couldn't dance, but I knew that if I had learned to do it that they could as well. I had plans even then to become a dance instructor, although I didn't realize it.

I did know, though, that I needed to move to the San Francisco Bay area because that was where my exwife had moved with our daughter. I thought that perhaps I would teach Swing Dancing in the Bay area, but after I arrived I realized how woefully under-prepared I was to do so. Compared to the local social dancers I was only a beginner, and there was no way I could consider teaching. But that was OK, because the dancing was great! I took classes, even some private lessons, with all of the local swing dance instructors and very much enjoyed social dancing.

Eventually I saw an ad on a computer bulletin board about The Metronome Ballroom's Teacher Training Program. The next session would cover Nightclub and Swing dances. I knew I wanted to be a dance teacher so I called the instructor, Diane Jarmolow. At first I was only interested in the Swing and Nightclub section of the program, but Diane said, "Lots of people only do one of the three month sections, but we just started the Rhythm section, and the more you know the more well rounded you will be, and the more you will be able to offer your students. I would suggest starting with the Rhythm section, you've only missed a couple of weeks." I was unconvinced at first since I had no ballroom experience, but then she mentioned that two of the local world-class swing instructors, Paul Overton and Sharon Ashe, had each taken the course. That was the last bit of information that I needed to decide to start the Rhythm teacher training program.

In June of 2001 I started the Rhythm teacher training program with just four hours a week of teacher training classes and an hour or so a week practicing with a partner for the skills testing. By the second month I had added a couple of regular group classes to my schedule because as part of the program teacher trainees could take as many classes as we wanted to, as long as we took a balancing role. It was very good to learn how to follow beginning leaders because it definitely improved my own leading skills since it became obvious what worked (and what didn't).

After only a few weeks in class the teacher trainees were offered the opportunity to be in a performance showcase at the Cowell Theatre in San Francisco. I had only ever been on stage once or twice, and had never danced in front of an audience, but I felt that the experience would be well worth it, and it was! Our group consisted of four teacher trainees, one new teacher and Alise Halbert, the silver-certified teacher who choreographed our routine. For someone who had never been involved with the theatre, being on stage and performing in front of an audience is an experience I will never forget!

The Nightclub and Swing section of the teacher training started in September of 2001 and I thoroughly enjoyed the classes. After my Rhythm section experience I knew how the class would run, so I started off more comfortable than my new classmates. I had also been doing East Coast Swing and Lindy Hop

socially for years so learning both the leader and follower roles came relatively easy to me. It was a thoroughly enjoyable three months.

By the time the Smooth section started in January of 2002 I was one of the few returning students in the program. Several students had completed the one-year program, and others had only ever intended to do the Nightclub and Swing section. However, with the start of each new section came new students. Some had years of dance experience, while others were dancing for the first time. My partner for the first Waltz skill test was a new dancer and she did great on our first test together. She was very nervous leading up to the test but considering that she had never danced a routine in front of an audience previously she danced wonderfully. Again, the look of joy and excitement on her face as we finished was incredible. I enjoyed practicing for and taking that test, and I am very pleased to have shared that experience with another new teacher in training.

Shortly after starting the Smooth teacher training section my ex-wife told me that she was planning to move to Vermont with our daughter. I knew I would need to be as well trained as possible before leaving the support of a full-time ballroom, so I began practicing and studying for my certification exam. I also took advantage of one of the many dance competitions in the Bay area in order to do my first Pro-Am as an amateur. In case I ever do competitions as a professional I don't want my first time out on the floor with a paying student to be my first time out on the floor! I did well, I got 3 Firsts in Newcomer, and 2 Firsts and a Second in Pre-Bronze. All of you who have been involved in competition know that this isn't really as great as it sounds. I was the only person in my Newcomer category, and there was only one other competitor in my Pre-Bronze category. I do feel good about the competition, though, because I had only been doing Waltz, Foxtrot and Tango for two months while my competitor had competed in the same category the previous year.

I took my first DVIDA Junior Associate certification exam but I did not feel really good about it. I didn't feel like I quite knew what I wanted to say, and it showed. I failed my first exam by 0.02 points. I wasn't surprised, but I was disappointed and I began working even harder to be certain of passing the exam the

second time. A month later I took the exam again and passed the exam with high honors. There is something about the confidence that you gain while studying for a certification exam that just can't be described. I know that material now, and I will remember it forever.

I passed my certification exam a month or so before leaving California but I choose not to teach because I wanted the option to remain an amateur. I was pleasantly surprised when I arrived in Vermont because although Burlington only has a population of around 50,000 people, there is an active dance community here. There are strong Swing and Salsa communities, The Vermont Dancesport Academy has competitive Latin and Standard groups, and there are several other ballroom instructors, all supported by the Green Mountain Chapter of USABDA. It turns out, though, that I am the only certified instructor in the state of Vermont teaching American Style Smooth and Rhythm dances.

I started teaching class part time in October of 2002 with beginning Smooth and Rhythm classes that cover the first few figures in several dances. This format gives people the chance to practice the basics of several dances and lets them see how various dances are related. I am focused mostly on teaching beginners to dance, especially those who think that they can't dance. The look of joy on peoples faces when they finally do something that they have always wanted to do is just wonderful! After two months of classes one of my students told me that she had fulfilled a childhood dream, to Waltz around a dance floor. Enthusiasm practically bubbled out of her as she described the evening and the fact that I was partially responsible was an incredibly positive feeling.

After only six months as a dance instructor I am beginning to develop my own style of teaching and I am becoming comfortable with being the expert in charge. After class one night a student said that my classes just keep getting better and better. She particularly likes that we review the material each week, and that each month we cover a mixture of "gem" figures, for a feeling of flash, and simple figures for a feeling of substance.

Due to my background as a social dancer, my teaching style is developing towards covering the syllabus figures that I was trained to teach, but then ensuring that the students know they can change the figure if necessary. “The syllabus figure is danced like this, but you could also dance it like this, or turn this step a little more to dance it around a corner.” After one class a student with previous dance experience made it a point to say that she enjoys my classes because I’m not strict about everyone dancing the figure exactly according to the syllabus. I am strict about knowing the “correct” figure and technique in my own mind, but most social dancers want to dance and have fun, they don’t want to concentrate on doing everything correctly!

As everyone knows, the only way to become a better dancer is to practice. Training with a competent (and certified) instructor will ensure that dance students get as much as possible from their practice time. However, there are large areas of the country where there are few dancers, and even fewer instructors because there aren’t enough students to support full-time instructors. What do dancers in these small communities do? Dancers can take lessons with available teachers, or use videotapes as instructors. Instructors can also use videotapes to augment their teaching skills but because nothing can compare to the feedback from a trained professional they should also consider attending workshops and conferences to continue their own training.

I’ve been emailing a gentleman in Idaho who seems to be dancing toward becoming the local instructor because there is no one else available and because he is interested and dedicated to partner dancing. He is concerned about becoming an instructor without outside support, though, because he might not teach correctly. I told him to consider certification because he will be certain to learn the technical background of ballroom dance. Both Dancevision and The Ballroom Dance Teachers College offer week-long certification workshops for teachers and dancers interested in becoming certified.

I started dancing six years ago and it has become an incredibly important part of my life. It is highly unlikely that I will ever be a dance champion but that doesn’t matter because I know that I will have a huge influence on dozens, hundreds, or maybe even thousands, of new dancers over my teacher career. I

encourage everyone who is interested in teaching dance to start training with that goal in mind. I may never be able to support myself teaching dance full time in my community, but being able to share my joy of dance with newcomers is incredibly rewarding!