



May I Have This Dance?

Gloria Clark
Dancing for Mind, Body and Community

by Greg Lilly, Lifestyle Editor

Ballroom dancing seems to be growing in popularity with television shows and charity events inviting everyone to the dance floor. In Williamsburg, several dance studios and groups provide opportunities to learn ballroom dancing and then enjoy it in a social settings. According to Steve Kirvan, owner of 7 Cities Ballroom Dance Studio, dancing has many health benefits - physical, mental and social.

“Ballroom can be physically and mentally demanding,” Steve says, “which people like, especially while having fun.” 7 Cities Ballroom is one studio where Gloria Clark dances. She is a woman who has embraced ballroom dancing as a fun and social part of her healthy lifestyle.

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“I always enjoyed moving to music,” Gloria says. “It makes me happy. I would put music on while cleaning the house and I find myself just bouncing around and moving to that.” The love of music and movement had Gloria creating a dance floor wherever she was. At the time, she had never taken formal lessons.

Gloria’s first husband of 27 years did not enjoy ballroom dancing. “We didn’t dance,” she says. “After my divorce, like a lot of people, I wanted to get involved in something for the social aspect. You find all your friends are married and you feel like a third wheel when you’re with that group. I guess it was a way to expand my circle of friends after the divorce.” Dances were held in gyms, community centers, anywhere there was room - and there were a number of available places where she lived in Michigan. “I liked the clean, healthy atmosphere the dances provided. I loved dancing with the group.”

Dancing was the focus for Gloria; she wasn’t looking for a date, just community. “For me,” she says, “it was a chance to let loose after a week of work, to go out and have fun, to listen to music, to be with other people who enjoy the same things.”

She and her now-husband, Rick, developed a long-distance relationship when they started seeing each other. “He always said if we lived in the same town, he’d take ballroom dancing lessons with me,” Gloria explains. “I used to think you had to have a partner to try ballroom, but now I know you don’t have to. You can still take lessons and go to the group lessons and dances. The people are so friendly that you will always have people to dance with.”

She and Rick married in September 2003. Gloria left Michigan and her friends from the dance group. She held Rick to his promise of ballroom dancing, and once they were settled in Williamsburg, they found a ballroom dancing group. “We went to our very first dance that February over at Quarterpath Recreation Center,” she says. “We went not knowing the first thing about ballroom dancing. The people were so friendly, so outgoing and willing to help. They made us feel welcome.”

At the recreation center, everyone helped introduce them to the dances. “The men showed me the steps,” she adds, “and the women helped my husband.” She and Rick had a wonderful time and continued to go to dances, learning new steps and styles of dance. They met new friends and found an activity they both could share.

“We wanted to have something to do together that was fun and that was socializing, that got us out of the house, made us move and be physical,” Gloria explains. “We fell in love with it.” They wanted to learn more, to improve their technique, so they decided to take private lessons with a professional instructor. Gloria says there are several studios in the area that teach classes such as 7 Cities Ballroom Dance Studio. They have group classes and Friday night parties that help people interested in ballroom meet each other.

“We just love it,” Gloria says. “The movement, the music, it puts smiles on our faces whenever we’re on the dance floor.” She adds that dancing relieves her stress and tension. Plus socially, they have met some very dear friends through dancing.

Psychologically, dancing gave her and Rick “a life outside of his work, and I needed a life outside going to the doctor’s office. I’m a breast cancer survivor. I was in the recuperation stages when I first moved to Williamsburg. I’m a people person and needed people.” Ballroom dancing provided her with a reprieve from the worry and stress of breast cancer recovery, a time to forget the struggle, a time to laugh and move and float across the dance floor.

Physically, she says she could feel the cardiovascular workout and increased stamina created by ballroom dancing. "I know when Rick and I started, oh my gosh," she says, "to dance one Cha Cha was plenty enough for me. I really had to start ramping up to be able to dance more. Because I was recovering from breast cancer, I could tell from one month to the following month that I was getting stronger and able to last longer. You also find out that if you do a Foxtrot, you're using a lot of muscles you didn't know you had – it's a great workout."

She adds that dancing helped her track her progress of becoming stronger during her cancer recovery. "I'm not one that cares about doing exercise," she admits. "I want to do something that I like, that I enjoy, that doesn't feel like work." Ballroom dancing fit the bill.

Increased mental stimulation comes from learning the steps and patterns used in different dances. Those routines help keep her mind "on its toes." Also, she says she learned more about music. "I was never a music student," she says, "but after learning a little about dance, a song would come on the radio and I would recognize the timing and rhythm in music as a Waltz, or a Rumba, or a Foxtrot."

Ballroom dancing offered many types of styles for Gloria to try. "I love the Waltz," she says. "It is so beautiful. When you make those long strides, you actually feel like you're gliding. It's an elegant, romantic dance in a simple form. It's like being a princess, floating around with this beautiful music and you can visualize yourself in one of those flowing gowns. I like that."

Each dance has its own emotion and mood. Gloria likes Swing and Cha Cha for their energy and fun attitude. "The Foxtrot is always beautiful," she adds. "One dance I always wanted to do, but I can't seem to get it together is the Quick Step. That one is difficult for me."

Gloria offered advice on how her neighbors could get in step with ballroom dancing. "Since my husband and I do this together," she says, "it gives us an activity besides going to movies, or to the mall, or watching television. There are a lot of places here where you can ballroom dance at least once a week – like Steve's place [7 Cities Ballroom Dance Studio]. USA Dance Williamsburg Chapter (which Gloria is involved in) has a social dance the first Saturday of each month. The entrance fee includes a lesson at the beginning of the dance. It's a nice way for people to see what ballroom is all about."

Potential dancers don't have to know any steps before attending a dance. That can't be stressed enough for the men: No previous experience required.

"We hear a lot from women saying their husbands won't come to the dance," Gloria says. "That's the case for a lot of women. If your husband even likes to bounce his foot to music and keep time, he's going to have a good time that night. He will see so many people having fun - people in their eighties are out there dancing as well as college-aged couples. I try to encourage all people. Single ladies, single men, married couples, old and young - it's a lot of socializing, a lot of dancing in a clean, safe, fun atmosphere."

As Steve Kirvan twirls a student around the dance floor, Gloria watches and smiles. "I hope I never quit dancing," she says. "It's good for us. It's a date night for me and Rick. I hope we're still on the dance floor into our nineties. I don't want to stop." NDN

To find out more about USA Dance Williamsburg, VA Chapter visit:
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