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## **I COULDN'T HAVE DANCED ALL NIGHT; BUT I MET SOME WHO CAN (Published in the October 2005 issue of Columbia Home) - 10/1/2005**

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About 1,000 Words

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### I COULDN'T HAVE DANCED ALL NIGHT; BUT I MET SOME WHO CAN

COLUMBIA, Mo. – Boy, was I out of step. I thought ballroom dancing meant Lawrence Welk, Guy Lombardo, and a bubble machine. Imagine my surprise when I found myself rock-stepping with my wife to “Play that Funky Music, White Boy.”

“What is the reason behind learning to dance? You’re going to prepare yourself to go somewhere and have fun,” said Daniel Gerhart, director of Ballroom Dance Studio of Columbia. “The worst thing I can think of would be a ‘boot camp’ dance studio... ‘Line up, maggots! Rock-step, one, two...”

Ballroom has progressed since my parents did it. Gerhart said the famous big bands of the 1940s played predominantly music for fox trots and swing. “Music has evolved; we do a lot more than that nowadays,” he said. “We have mambo, we have rumba, and we have cha-cha.”

Two years ago, Columbians Dan and Ginger Schapira signed up for lessons at Ballroom Dance Studio. “My wife and I, we’ve danced all our lives; we just never had any formal training,” Dan Schapira said. “Ballroom dancing is dancing with your partner in a way where you’re dancing together. The kind of dancing we grew up with, you’re just out there dancing around, and I’m doing my thing and she’s doing her thing. We just felt like we wanted to have a little more structure.”

They took the studio’s \$129 introductory special and then kept going. Schapira and his wife took adult education lessons, which were fun but didn’t go far enough. “Those introductory lessons, the real basic stuff, it kind of came easy to us,” Schapira said. “We really wanted to get into a situation where we could learn and continue to learn and raise our level of dancing skill.”

According to the National Dance Council of America, Gerhart said, anyone who professes to be one can be a dance instructor, so it is best to choose a studio with certified teachers. When starting his school three-and-a-half years ago, he chose to affiliate with Dance Vision International. He now has about 100 students, most of whom are in their 40s and 50s.

As serious ballroom dancers get more experience, they can move into higher designations, the bronze, silver and gold levels of dancing. “The better you get at it, the more fun it is, and

the better you get at it, the easier it is for you to learn what's next," said Gerhart, who has more than 30 years professional experience. "The bronze standard is considered the epitome of good ballroom dancing all over the world, and we teach 12 different dances. If you were to learn the most popular six, you could be the best dancer on the floor at anybody's party anywhere in the world."

This coming spring, the Schapiras intend to compete at the bronze level, which Gerhart said is the hardest standard to learn because it includes the basics of how to move and work with a partner. Silver is even more advanced, and gold is mostly for competitions and shows.

Most students take private lessons each week and attend a Thursday night party lesson, which consists of dancing continuously to about 25 songs, with a short intermission. Students learn how to mix in a crowd, practicing foxtrots, swing, rumba, waltz, tango and the cha-cha.

Gerhart said he chooses the music carefully for each dance party, continuously updating and changing the selections, pulling from a 700-song recorded computer library and extensive CD collection. The parties are what Joe Parks and his wife, Sharon Thomas-Parks, enjoy most. The Columbians started lessons about two years ago.

There are three main types of people who tend to enjoy ballroom dancing, Joe says, couples who like to get into routines and choreography together, people who like to compete, and social dancers, who like to get out on the floor and meet new people. He said he tends to fall into the latter group.

"We enjoy it a great deal; it's fun socially, we enjoy it physically and it's a great deal of our entertainment," he said. "I like it because I've lost 8 to 10 pounds doing it, and I have better energy, I have better posture, I move better, and I feel more confident generally because I'm more confident physically."

In ballroom dancing, the man surveys the dance floor and controls the couple's direction. "All I have to do is pay attention to my partner, it's a singular focus on him because he is communicating to me in everything that he does," said Sharon Thomas-Parks. "It's really kind of paradoxical because this is a very disciplined art, but it appears to be very free-flowing, so you have precision with grace and ease."

And dancing is not just for couples. Another long-time customer, Bernice Holtmeyer enjoys the variety. "When I started to take lessons, I wanted to learn the waltz because when I was growing up members of my family used to dance, and danced very well, but I never learned" she said. "I had no idea that there was this whole range of other dances to learn, so it's really opened up a lot of enjoyment to me that I didn't even consider."

Estaline Hunziker of California, Mo., likes the competitive aspect most. She competed in the 32<sup>nd</sup> annual Heart of America DanceSport Championships last month in Kansas City with instructor David Liu, earning four threes in the silver category. "I think competition gives students something to work towards," Hunziker said. "It is fun, and it's challenging to me because I've never achieved in any sports."

While the competition beckons, Schapira says the main reason he continues to dance is that it always puts him in a good mood. "You may be a little bit in a bad mood, or maybe you've had a rough day, but we go dancing, and by the time we get done with that, our mind has cleared and we are in a good mood and we are upbeat," he said. "It does that to us every single time. Dancing is just a mood lifter. You just can't go dancing and not come away from there in a much, much better mood."

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