

SPEAKING OF DANCING...

Tell Me More

by Gigi Jensen



"Why did you start folk dancing? How old were you? Who taught you or mentored you? Tell me about your dance."

These are the questions I asked of a few of the folk dancers I know. I'm greatly curious about this world of folk dance since I'm quite new to it. Thanks to the invitation Pampa Cortes received to teach at Stockton Folk Dance Camp in 2012, I went to my very first folk dance event as his teaching assistant. He felt at home; you were like the people with whom he grew up and for whom folk dancing was a normal part of life. As for me, I'd found a new dance home.

In the 10 years since, I've been introduced to many folk dance communities, in some cases as a teacher, in others as a community dancer. I appreciate the creation of virtual dancing. It's opened so many dance doors. What follows are some of the stories of folk dancers I've met on my folk dance journey. Some I know in person; others are new friends thanks to the Internet. Maybe you know them. Perhaps their stories are similar to yours.

How old were you when you started to dance, and where did you start?

Everyone I interviewed said folk dancing in school was their entry. For some it was grammar school, for others high school, and the rest mentioned university classes and folk dance clubs.

Roo Lester said she started folk dancing in California during elementary grades in rainy day physical education classes. Alyza Lee Solomon began in her college years. Cricket Rayburn folk danced in both high school and college. Sally Jenkins started folk dance at Brigham Young University. An invite by a couple of university professors got Eileen Hug into folk dance. Mady Newfield switched from classical ballet to folk dancing in high school. Gordon Deeg shared that folk dancing at his junior high was a big thing. Ahmet Luleci explained that where he grew up in Turkey, dancing was very popular and many of the boys participated, in part because it required nothing more than shoes versus the cost of athletic equipment. Warren Jensen only started recently because of my involvement with folk dancing. As for me, I will always be grateful for my elementary school's folk dance efforts (thank you for the schottische and square dance lessons).

Who taught you or mentored you?

For those respondents who addressed this question, the people who've inspired and supported their dance include family, community dance friends, club leaders, and teachers. Descriptors included "a shining star in my dance world," "a great support," "a true blessing," and "a big supporter." I found Sally Jenkins' answer to be a testimony to the valuable role a mentor plays: "Local friends. One was an elementary school music/movement teacher, who absolutely believed I

could learn to dance, even when I felt too clumsy myself." Another, Eileen Hug, explained that in her case, "My friend from a college class was my first mentor. She taught a lot of the dances in the university club."

Some respondents were specific:

Roo Lester: Elsie Ivancich Dunin, Allegra Fuller Snyder

Alyza Lee Solomon: Natica Angilly and her Poetic Dance Theater Company.

Cricket Rayburn: Vivian Woll, Vyts Beliajus, Pearl Atkinson

Mady Newfield: her mother, an opera singer, then music teacher, and concert pianist, "was a big supporter of my doing what I loved so much."

Tell me about your dance journey:

Everyone had an interesting story to tell about their dancing journey. I'll attempt to summarize.

For all, dance is the common thread that spans their lives. Whether starting at age 3 or after parenting duties lessened, they all had exposure to the dancing of others throughout their lives. All experienced dancing in the school system. For a few, dancing was a better option than sports. In some cases, dancing was a bridge between leaving one home and moving to a new one. A couple mentioned that folk dance gave them a chance to explore their cultural heritage. One described folk dance as "three-dimensional." Many mentioned they've taught folk dance, sometimes by necessity, since there were no existing dance clubs in their community. A couple of respondents studied and danced in other countries.

A variety of folk dance genres were mentioned: Square dance, Contra, English and Scottish Country Dancing, Israeli, Hungarian, Greek, and Argentine, as well as the Mashed Potato, ballet, tap, jazz, modern, poetic dance, jitterbug, and waltz. A few also mentioned that important role music has played in their dancing lives. Sally Jenkins shared that, "I was 15, when my neighbors gave us tickets to see The Tamburitzans." It took another 7 years for her to discover she could folk dance thanks to seeing another show, this time by the Brigham Young University Dancers, which included an audience participation dance and an invitation to join in classes on campus.

You know your own journey as a dancer. It isn't important whether you're a new or a long-time dancer, currently dancing or only watching others dance, whether you're going to in-person events or virtually dancing. What's important is it makes you a part of a unique community, one that always has room for more dancers. As the pandemic recedes enough to safely participate in public activities, invite people to dance. Encourage others to go to concerts and shows, or invite them to go with you if that's an option. Do you feel the desire to teach, but don't know where to start? Let me know! I may be able to point you in that direction. The bottom line is this: **You, too, have a dance story. Are you sharing it?**

I want to thank those people who generously shared their stories with me: Eileen Hug, Debbie Jackson, Sally Jenkins, Roo Lester, Mady Newfield, Cricket Rayburn, Alyza Lee Solomon, as well as Gordon Deeg, Ahmet Luleci, & Warren Jensen

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