

YOU MARRY EARLY IN LIFE, YOUR kids finish high school and head to college. You are accomplished in your careers, and you've settled into your marital routine. What should you do now?

Try starting *serious* ballroom dancing with your spouse. For Scott and Bernie Osborn, it was a real “high.”

“Dancing gave us a feeling of belonging to a wonderful new group of people. It was the beginning of a whole new phase of married life,” said Bernie.

For Art and Cheri Rolnick, dancing “enriched our lives, our communication, and our marriage.”

The two middle-aged couples were friends when they started free social dance classes with professional Jeff Nehrbass at their local fitness club (now Lifetime Fitness). Dance wasn't entirely new to any of them; Le Sueur High School sweethearts Scott and Bernie enjoyed dancing swing and slow dances together at prom and elsewhere. (Scott: “I thought she was hot!”). Art took social dance lessons in Detroit in preparation for his bar mitzvah. Cheri was a self-described “street dancer,” later encouraged by her future mother-in-law to successfully audition as a “go-go” dancer.

Today, both couples have danced at the highest levels of amateur ballroom dance competition; are still dancing together in their 70s; celebrating more than 50 years of marriage; spending time with children and grandchildren; and are recently retired from over 25 years on a high-level dance formation team.

Getting Started

“I had no idea what I was getting into with dancing. No idea. I just wanted to dance. It's not that easy,” began Bernie Osborn, who worked in banking, and later in school administration. “I grew up on a farm with ten siblings, and you didn't always get to

Want to Enrich Your Mid-Life Marriage? Try Ballroom Dance!

BY EMBER REICHGOTT JUNGE

do what you wanted. This [dancing] was one of those things. I always had a deep interest in dancing, but you have to start at the beginning. It's a lot more involved than I thought.”

Dr. Scott Osborn, who owned a dental practice, added, “My dental patients would tell me ‘that's so romantic! when they heard I was a ballroom dancer. No! If you are going to do competitive dance, it is anything *but* romantic. It's a lot of work.”

The “beginning” for the Osborns meant taking private bronze-level lessons from Jeff and Cindy Nehrbass. But things don't always go as planned.

“Don't ever make me do this again!” Scott told Bernie as they came off the floor after performing a bronze waltz at an early showcase. The stress of performing in front of people caused him to “ad lib” with higher-level silver steps in a bronze routine.

As Bernie recalled, “Jeff came over. ‘What in hell were you doing out there? Scott replied, ‘What can I say, I panic in silver.’”

There seems to be an independent streak in middle-aged beginners. When Art and Cheri started taking lessons with Jeff, they insisted on starting at the gold level. Did Jeff agree with that?



Scott and Bernadette Osborn practice Smooth in approximately 2000. Photo provided by Scott and Bernadette Osborn.

“No! We didn’t listen to him,” laughed Cheri. “He also told us not to start competing at a national competition, but that’s where we first competed. We didn’t know what we were doing. Art was dancing every which way and a judge pulled me off in the middle of heats and asked, ‘Do you know about line of dance?’ ‘What does that mean?’ I asked. He said, ‘See this circle? Try to stay in it.’”

Art added, “We were such novices, but we had fun. We actually got first place, because we were the only ones in gold.”

This independent streak may exist in part because both Rolnicks have earned doctorate degrees. Dr. Cheri Rolnick is an epidemiologist who became Associate Director of Research at the Health Partners Foundation.

“My career as an epidemiologist used my intellect,” said Cheri, “but music touches my soul.”

The experience for Dr. Art Rolnick, Director of Research for the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, was different.

“When we first started taking coaching lessons, I kind of poo-pooed it intellectually. I figured it’s no big deal. Then I realized how intellectual it was. The coaches were amazing. You had to understand body movement and coordination and choreography. I like the intellectual aspect of it. I found the coaches really bright people, and I enjoyed interacting with them, not just about dancing but the social aspect of it.”

Today the Rolnicks work with professionals Nathan Daniels and Mariusz Olszewski.

Formation Team: The Equalizer

Key to the dance development of both couples was their early participation in a formation team initially organized by Nehrbass and later by Scott Anderson and Deanne Michael.

“I had asked Jeff to do this for some time,” said Bernie. “I like dancing with our friends on the floor. I’m a bit anxious, so this makes competitions less nerve-racking and a lot more fun.”

Scott added, “The formation helped us with technique that we used in our individual dancing.”

Both couples loved the social aspects of the formation team.

“We made some really close friends,” said Scott. “There were probably 100 members of the team on and off (over 25+ years). The teams brought all kinds of people together from all walks of life.”

Art agreed, saying “One reason I loved it is it’s a great equalizer. When you are on the dance floor, they don’t care if you are a CEO, a plumber, an educator, or a billionaire. They just care about dancing. We’ve met wonderful people through dancing we would never have met socially.”

As an example, the Osborns hired a dance member to work in their yard, becoming “dear friends” with him.

The formation team was pivotal for the Rolnicks in another way. Since all other couples were dancing in competitions, the Rolnicks had to take private weekly lessons to keep up. Art didn’t want to compete, but Jeff taught them routines anyway. Then Cheri was invited to compete with another partner in Theatre Arts in a national competition, in part due to her small size. Art decided to go with her; so why not get on the dance floor themselves? Hence that first national competition, and the rest is history.



Scott and Bernadette Osborn and Gary and Carol Stroick dance at a competition in Rochester, MN in the late 1990's. Photo provided by Scott and Bernadette Osborn.

Taking “The Lead” in Marriage and Dance

There’s no doubt that bringing dance into marriage (or marriage into dance) requires strong marital foundation and communication. These couples were so connected that one spouse could hardly start a thought without the other person finishing it, nor were they shy about their strengths and weaknesses.

“I think ballroom dancing is like life in general. You have good days, bad days, days when you are upset with each other, days when things are going beautifully. In some ways, ballroom dancing is like golf. If you are a mediocre golfer, you hit just enough good shots to keep you coming back to the game, right? Well, when you have a dance that feels so effortless and you walk off the floor and you know that you just nailed it, it’s a high. It’s a great feeling when it happens. As in life, it doesn’t happen all the time,” Scott said.

And when it doesn’t happen, what does it feel like?

Bernie said, “I can’t imagine that everyone doesn’t have some tension in dancing when you are face to face with your partner. And if you are married, you tend to be a little more...”

“It’s easier to express yourself,” Scott said.

Bernie continued, “Through the years I’ve learned to let go a lot quicker. Because it’s dancing and we love it but we’ve just got to...”

“Keep in mind why you are doing it. A lot of times the husband and wife have different interests and spend many hours apart. We decided to do something together,” said Scott.

Dance offered such a unique opportunity to learn about each other and themselves.

“Being a dentist and a perfectionist, it’s hard to admit to being the person at fault, but when you learn the problem and how to correct it, that makes it that much better. Most dentists are perfectionists. But when that carries

over to your personal life, that can be a real problem for the other person.

“One thing that hit home for me a lot is that if things weren’t going well it was usually the lead that was the problem,” Scott said.

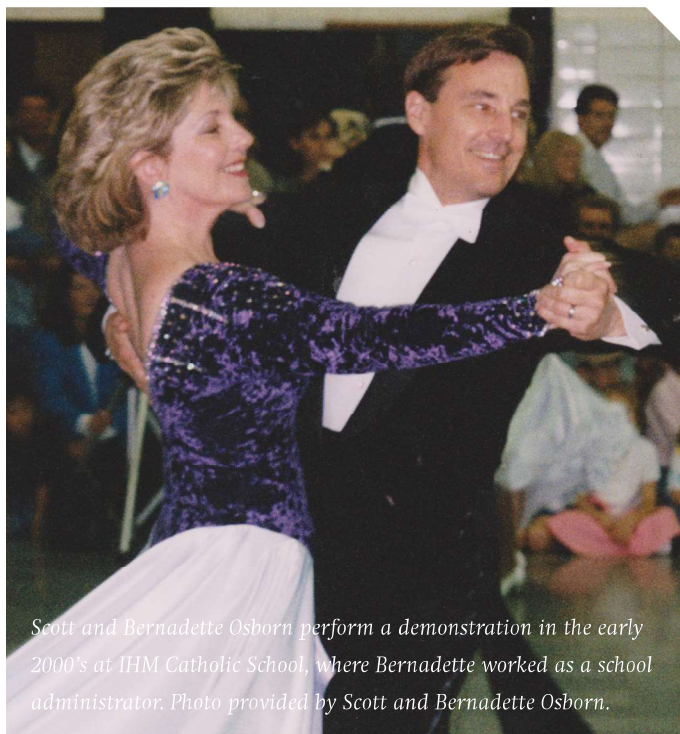
“I have different needs than him... he caught on real quick,” Bernie said.

One thing the Osborns found helpful after several decades of male coaches was working with female coach Meghan Afonkin.

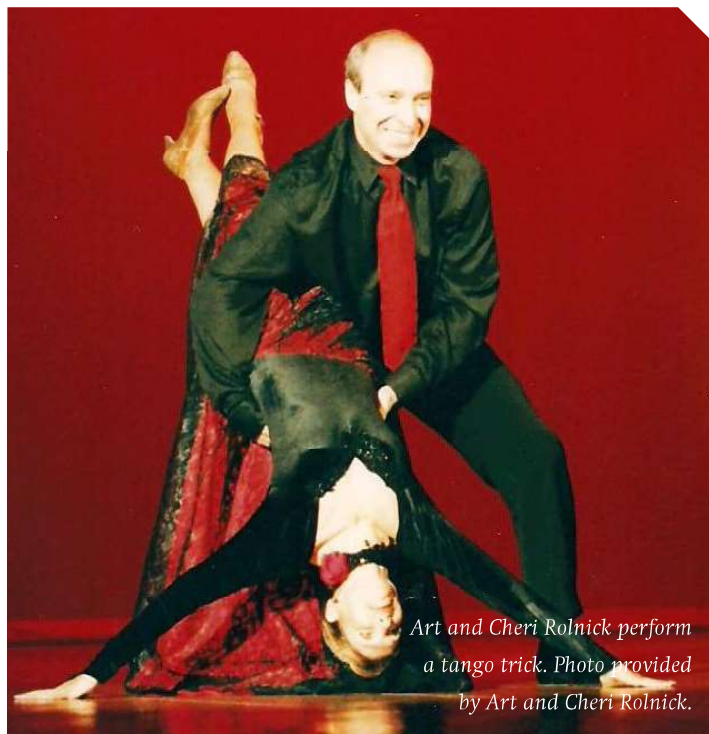
Said Scott, “From my perspective, Meghan has an uncanny ability to diagnose the problem with the lead, and she would coach me through it, and she would ‘back lead’ me so I knew how it was supposed to feel. Nine times out of ten, when I went back to dance with Bernie, she was smiling because she could feel the difference.”

Added Bernie, “Trying to figure that out as an amateur couple, you really can’t do it.”

“Especially if one of us is a perfectionist and we think we know it all,” added Scott.



Scott and Bernadette Osborn perform a demonstration in the early 2000's at IHM Catholic School, where Bernadette worked as a school administrator. Photo provided by Scott and Bernadette Osborn.



Art and Cheri Rolnick perform a tango trick. Photo provided by Art and Cheri Rolnick.

“The Lead” was also the key issue for Art and Cheri.

“The tension comes because the man has to lead and the woman follows. Coaches would tell Cheri, ‘you live for the lead.’ She said, ‘Fine. Where is the lead?’,” Art said.

The couple learned to negotiate. When Art first learns choreography he concentrates on himself and practices for a long time. He tells Cheri, to “lead yourself, don’t expect anything from me.” When he feels more confident,

he’ll say that he’s ready to lead. This way of learning is tough for Cheri.

“I catch on to dance much more quickly than Art. Our learning styles are so very different. I feel the music; the music talks to me.”

Art agrees, saying, “She’s more natural, she’s a much better dancer overall, she’s much better at musicality than I am. There are some songs I can’t hear right. She can. So I count on her. Her body resonates with the music so I can feel it through her. I

depend on her, even though I’m supposed to be the lead. As partners you learn your partner’s strengths and weaknesses.”

“You deal with it. We see couples screaming at each other off the floor. We heard the woman of one top couple we were competing against say to her partner, ‘When did you decide you didn’t like our choreography?’ It was very gentle; he clearly had gone blank,” said Cheri.

“We’ve learned to communicate in a way that we can move forward and progress, even if we have different skills. In this case, Cheri is the better athlete. I have to stuff my ego a bit and learn how to take coaching from my wife in a nice way, and she has to learn how to coach me the way I’m going to respond.”

Sharing the Joy

While dance clearly brings fulfillment to both couples, sometimes others can benefit. Scott and Bernie danced several years at the Wisconsin Open. One year, the winning couple in their age group sought them out, wanting to give thanks.

“When we came and watched you as a couple a few years ago, you were having so much fun. You looked like you were really into each other and having such a great time that it inspired us. We wouldn’t have gotten serious about dance if we hadn’t seen you out there, and figured we could do it too.”

Said Scott, “Wow, you never know how you are influencing people. I never would have thought of us in that way.”

Ember Reichgott Junge is an amateur ballroom dancer and former member of the Twin Cities Dancesport Formation Team with the Osborns and Rolnicks. She welcomes ideas for stories at ember.reichgott@gmail.com for her book-in-progress, “Stories of Resilience from the Ballroom Dancer’s Heart.” **E**



A Scott and Bernadette Osborn and Art and Cheri Rolnick perform with the Twin Cities DanceSport Performance Team at Twin Cities Open 2019, culminating 25+ years of dancing on the formation team. Photo by Ryan Kenner Photography.



Scott and Bernadette Osborn, Art and Cheri Rolnick, and Ember Reichgott Junge perform “The Continental” with Twin Cities DanceSport Performance Team at Twin Cities Open 2017. Photo by Ryan Kenner Photography.