

# Miracles are Flying Around—and We Don't Even See Them

## Jim Carter's Story

BY EMBER REICHGOTT JUNGE

JIM CARTER RAN AWAY FROM HOME at age 14. He never went to high school; he hated school, in part because he attended seven different schools in seven states in one year as his family moved around. His dad was an alcoholic who abused his mom. At age 12, alcohol started to work for Jim as well, and years later he became a full-blown alcoholic. By age 19, Jim didn't care about anything. He hitchhiked across the U.S. and Canada to Alaska, working day jobs along the way.

"I was the kid off the street; I should have been in jail. I was an angry young man. I didn't care if the sun came up for me or you. I had no compassion. I knew no limits. I was a dangerous person."

When I met Jim at age 60 in 2017, he was a successful businessman willing to generously support the nonprofit Heart of Dance to bring partner dance to fifth-graders in Duluth, Minnesota. He could do that because he built a leak repair company over three decades that solved industrial pipe repair problems, often preventing plant shutdowns and workplace hazards under emergency and stressful conditions.

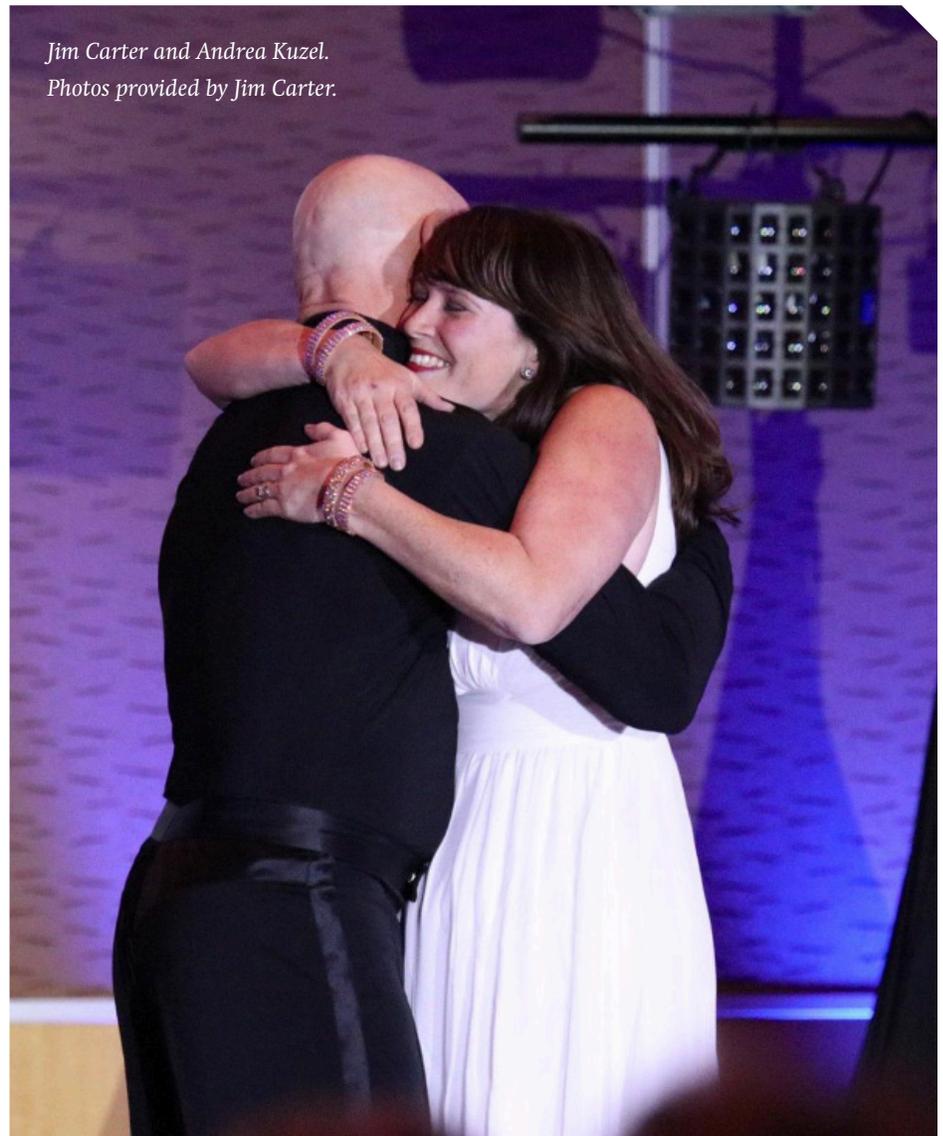
His generosity was stirred by his love of ballroom dance as "the most fun you can have with your clothes on." His dance teacher described Jim as an elegant dancer with beautiful frame, and "one of the best dancers in the studio" in his seven years of lessons.

Yes, it is the same Jim. Two things changed his life. First, Jim's dad stopped drinking and mom and dad came together again when Jim was in

his 20s. Dad was a mechanical genius. He could fix things; he could solve the toughest industrial problems. Jim learned from his dad, followed in his footsteps and became a licensed pipe-fitter. At a very young age, Jim was a foreman in a plutonium recovery plant.

The second thing? A 2000-pound buffalo named Nitro.

It was Memorial Day weekend of 2013. Jim, his wife Jan, and two toddler grandsons went to a buffalo ranch south of Duluth to buy meat from his 83-year old friend, Don. As the animals approached, Jim noticed Nitro, the Herd Bull. "I see you have the big guy here. Are we OK?" he asked several times. Don, who raised the bull, assured him



*Jim Carter and Andrea Kuzel.  
Photos provided by Jim Carter.*



Andrea Kuzel and Jim Carter.



Jim Carter.

that Nitro was coming for grain in the barn. An instant later, the bull charged Jim from behind and gored his left horn inside of Jim's right thigh.

Jim's femoral artery exploded as he launched 20-30 feet into the air, clearing the barn roof before he landed. People live an average of two minutes when the femoral artery is hit. Jan rushed the kids into their car seats, and cradled Jim's head in her lap. He looked up. "Honey, I don't think I'm going to make it. Make sure everyone knows I love them." Don tried to tie off the bleeding, but to no avail.

Then the miracles began. The bull horn didn't rip through his pelvis. Jim didn't break his neck when he landed. As Don prayed, he remembered a book he read 20 years before about the first heart transplant by Dr. Christiaan Barnard. They lost early transplant patients because "there weren't enough hands to stop the bleeding." So Don thrust his hand inside Jim's wound elbow deep, to squeeze off the flow near the pelvis.

The county fire truck arrived. Jim and Don loaded up together. But the ramp and slow lane of the highway were coned off due to construction, with holiday traffic backed up for miles. That is, until the ramp and lane were opened for them and their trooper escort, because construction had not

yet started. It still took an hour and five minutes to get to the hospital. Jim was conscious throughout with Don at his side, unwilling to let go.

Jim was in the ICU for five days. One shoulder was fractured, the other dislocated. Both rotator cuffs were torn. Leg nerves were cut. Though doctors took a vein from his good leg to replace the femoral artery, they predicted they could not save Jim's leg and he would never walk again. They expected a hospital stay of several months, but Jim would have none of it. He walked out of the hospital 12 days later.

Not a good choice. The pain was searing. It was like his leg was on fire, without respite. His leg swelled so it was not recognizable, infected by both the bull's horn and the farmer's hand. It took surgery, implanted drains and nine more months for the swelling to subside. And 24 hours of constant pain "if I let it."

Jim's leg was starting to atrophy. He went to physical therapy and Pilates "so the left side of my body could teach the right side what to do." There was no brain connection to his right leg. He knew he needed something more—that once the nerve stopped feeding the muscle, it was all over. How to keep the muscle alive? Jim bought a cattle prod and "wacked every trigger point from my hips to my toes three to four

times a day with an electric 9-volt hit to keep the muscle alive." That seemed to work.

When his physical therapist was summoned for lengthy jury duty, another therapist suggested he meet dance instructor Andrea Kuzel, who recently opened Superior Ballroom Dance Studio in Duluth. On January 5, 2014, Jim hid his walker in the car, propped himself up on the wall, and walked into the studio, downplaying how badly he was hurt.

"I told Andrea I needed to learn to reuse my leg. We started with a waltz box, and I stepped forward. 'Take a side step,' she said. I couldn't. She reached down, grabbed my leg, and it took a step. There was no brain connection in my right leg. I moved my left leg. 'Take another step.' I couldn't. While holding me up, Andrea moved my right leg backward. We did this over and over. It took me three weeks to master a waltz box step."

Jim spent hours in the studio practicing his waltz box in front of the mirror—sometimes ten hours a day. He thought if he could watch the movement in the mirror, he could grow a new set of nerves in the cortex of his brain to connect with his leg.

Jim was in the fight of his life. "Andrea was my angel. She has a genuine care for people that not many people

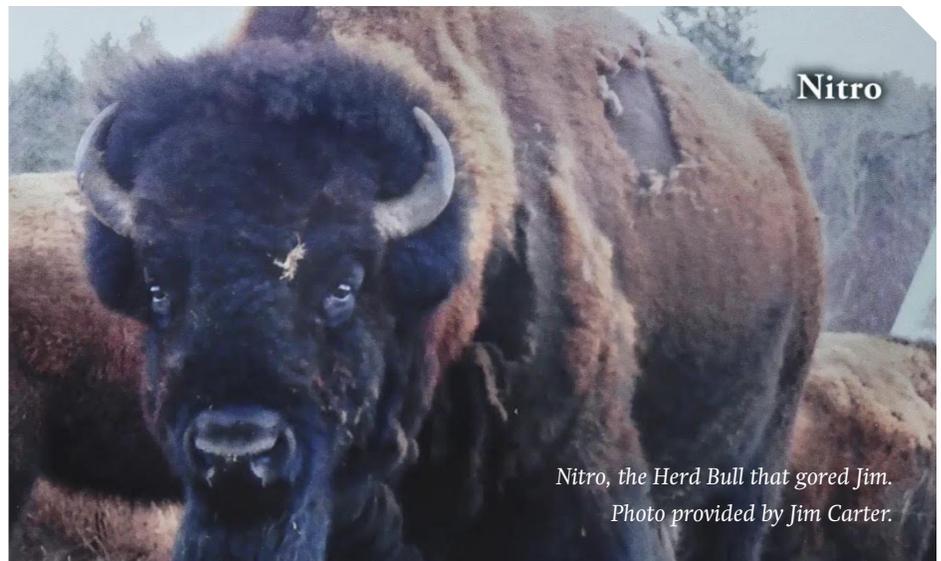
have. What she created for me was a safe place to learn to move and walk. I was taking that pain to a safe place and taking me out of my engineering stuff and my practical mind where I'm the guy who figures out everything. Had I stayed there, I wouldn't have been able to heal. I got on this whole other track with dance that I never experienced before—the creative side of my brain.”

It was all new for Jim. He never before listened to music. In his line of work, he doesn't talk with people; he fixes gas, acid and other leaks under pressure, stuff that people don't want to go near. No one questions him. He's the boss. He doesn't have to discuss things with people.

“I never went to high school; this is the first school I went to. Now young girls are scolding me, and I'm cracking up because no one scolds me. It was hilarious. This is like finishing school for me. I come in all rough and they're teaching me how to talk to women. Dance removed me from myself and took me into this big dance ball. Wow, so good for the spirit. It completely encompasses you and you cannot escape it. This was as much of the healing as anything else.”

As for Andrea, dance is about making lives better. She had no idea she was doing that at first—in part because she didn't understand the impact of Jim's injury.

“Jim told me, ‘I got attacked by a buffalo.’ He showed me where he lost a hand-size chunk of tissue,” recalled Andrea. “He talked about managing pain—I would feel his leg and it was on fire. He said it was like having a curling iron on his leg. Yet, he was always so matter of fact! There were some days when he just needed to dance...I realized he must be having a bad pain day.” Jim continued to dance—smooth and rhythm, solos, whatever, even winning



*Nitro, the Herd Bull that gored Jim.  
Photo provided by Jim Carter.*

“Top Newcomer Male” at Snow Ball Dance competition.

“Our whole time together has been seven years,” Andrea said. “He's so fun to dance with. He's a great student; he listens. There's no ego when it comes to dancing. Ego goes out the door. Jim is one of the only students I've had who didn't hear music when he started. He did not hear the beat! But he trained himself, listening in the car. He is physically fit and strong, so he can hold an elegant frame. He used dance technique to train his muscles, and he knew he had to train them properly.”

And seven years later, in 2020? Jim is back to running his successful business with his son. He developed a whole new company during the pandemic. Though refocused on his business, Jim says “I'm a dancer. It got me to where I needed to get. I have this wonderful thing for the rest of my life.”

And physically? “I have a lot of muscle tone in this leg now. I believe my main nervous system has integrated. I'm healed. My nerve pain is down to almost nothing, my shoulder pain down to almost nothing. It is an absolute miracle. I'm the last person I would have chosen for miracles.

Miracles are flying around so hard and fast, we don't even see them, because we are all closed up and busy. I think it's because I'm willing to open up and let miracles happen.”

Andrea believes there is more. Jim, the super problem-solver, took matters into his own hands for his healing. “Jim never has a bad attitude. If anyone asks him how he's doing, he responds ‘better than I deserve.’ He has a heart of gold. He never placed blame anywhere. To not hold resentment toward the farmer who assured him the bull would be fine is a different level of forgiveness. To me, that is amazing. That's Jim. He is an amazing guy.”

Yes, miracles are flying all around Jim. It seems he created a few of them himself. **E**