

PRIOR TO HER RETIREMENT IN 2010, Lisa Davis worked in Information Technology (IT) for 30 years, mostly as an IT Specialist for an Iowa state agency. It was an intense experience that required constant attention 24 hours/7 days a week. At one point Lisa slept with her Blackberry.

“You had to be prepared at the drop of a hat to address whatever virus or malware might affect any computers on your network. Sometimes I would work 24 to 48 hours at a stretch without relief. It was like constantly running a marathon,” recalled Lisa.

So in 1986, Lisa was open to an invitation from a female friend to attend a dance studio function in Des Moines. She had never danced a step. Dancing, especially the Friday night parties, became her one true form of escape from work.

“Once on the floor you are only thinking about dance. The music takes you away, and you are thinking about the challenge of the dance, not the problems of work. It is like a little getaway vacation,” said Lisa. And there was another benefit. “When I worked in IT, I developed terrible posture. I have to work so hard to overcome that habit. With exercise, I have made a tremendous difference in my dance posture.”

When the studio in Des Moines was to close around 1990, Lisa and nine others stepped in to save it. They paid expenses, took ownership with an S corporation and a board of directors, and managed operations from hiring dance instructors to cleaning the studio. Lisa took over music recordings and hosting Friday night parties. And because there was a gender imbalance, Lisa learned to dance both leader and follower parts.

Lisa gets it done. She has led a remarkable life both on and off the dance floor. As a career woman and

Dancer Lisa Davis

“I Don’t Know What ‘Like This’ Is”

BY EMBER REICHGOTT JUNGE



Lisa Davis and Markus Cannon compete at Snow Ball Dance Competition. Photo provided by Lisa Davis.

dancer myself, I resonate with her desire to escape work stress and straighten those rounded shoulders. Lots of people start dancing for the same reasons. But did I mention that Lisa has been blind since 1981?

Lisa lost her vision suddenly and unexpectedly when she was in graduate school at the University of Iowa. She was finishing up her doctorate degree in Auditory Physiology, studying the

genetics of hearing loss. She was studying in the library when she thought there was a problem with the lighting. She drove home not realizing she lost a lot of vision. The next day she drove to work at the hospital clinic where she registered a woman (ironically) for the eye clinic. She needed to run her papers, so Lisa stood up, turned around, and ran right into a pillar. “I didn’t see that pillar. When you lose your

vision, you don't realize it happened. People think it's like seeing dark or black. That's not what it's like. There's nothing there." Lisa never drove her car again. Today she has a very narrow field of vision in one eye "like looking through a soda straw," and no vision in the other eye. The underlying cause, said Lisa, came from being born three months premature and receiving too much oxygen, causing retinal damage. She was a pound and a half at birth. "I knew I had underlying issues, but I never thought it would result in losing vision altogether," she said.

Lisa finished her doctorate coursework but couldn't complete the research with animals for her dissertation. She had to change her career. As a newly blinded person, she enrolled in nine months of training from the Iowa Department for the Blind, and upon completion, was hired by the Department for their adult Orientation Center. That's where blind persons develop positive attitudes and self-confidence about blindness and learn how to do things without vision. Lisa taught Braille and computer technology, just as computers were brand new on the scene. The Department for the Blind had one of the first local networks in Iowa, and they needed someone to support the network and library. Lisa moved from the Orientation Center to support the IT system. I never imagined

that a blind person could have such a successful career in IT, but Lisa did it.

And what about dancing with others at those dance parties? "The dance community in Des Moines is a wonderful group of people. Really, it's more you. If they sense you are OK with your blindness, that it is nothing more than a physical characteristic like blue eyes or brown hair; they in turn become more comfortable. You quickly learn to ask for assistance easily and simply and people catch on quickly," Lisa said. Lisa also took it upon herself to learn to lead in the different dances. "I do a lot of leading at social dances—it's just plain fun," she said. She even had a female dance partner for practice and one competition. How do you lead when you are blind? "I had confidence that I knew the shape of the room. You can hear when you're getting close to a wall; there is a change in the sound, a change in the feeling of air. I'm not always successful. It is more challenging in competition with so many people on the floor. Partner signals help."

And dancing with instructors? Lisa has been dancing and competing with professional Markus Cannon for fifteen years, after she helped to personally recruit him to teach at the Des Moines Ballroom. "I'm a good follower. I can feel if a hair on his head moves," chuckled Lisa. Generally, Lisa has to teach her instructors to change their language in

group or private lessons. "They don't find it hard if they are good instructors. When an instructor says 'do it like this,' that doesn't mean anything to me. I don't know what 'like this' is. You want specificity. You ask for instructions. Right foot, pointed toe, forward and diagonal, foot stays on ground, step to side. He can't say 'put your arm here' or 'look in the mirror.' It won't work. The instructor may have to revisit things many times—foot placement, weight distribution, styling, as you focus on new elements. But that's probably similar to how you reduce something for any other student."

It is a challenge that Markus welcomed. "Working with Lisa has truly been one of the greatest experiences of my dancing career. She is an exceptional student showing traits every professional competitor searches for in a competitive partner. Her knowledge of musicality and the emotional connection she has to music plays a large role in her drive to dance." Markus continued, "Lisa has expanded my patience, knowledge and teaching skill sets, because I have to search for several ways of breaking down what is required of her in her different figures and shapes. Thankfully, she calls me a 'Master of Metaphors.' I paint clear pictures in colorful ways to illustrate the movements I ask people to perform or the feelings they should develop



Photo by the Minnesota Ballroom Blast Photography Team.

when correctly dancing a pattern.” Lisa agreed. “He’s a Master of Analogy. He provides me lots of detail, plenty of practice, and best of all, tons of fun. He is patient...oh, so patient!”

Markus noted several “favorite reoccurring moments” he shares with Lisa. One is when “she rests a hand on my shoulder and whispers ‘Mark, this is a Platinum lesson.’ That means I opened doors previously closed or foggy and the bright sunshine of clarity has exposed some phenomenal truth.” The other moments are when he sees her grinning ear to ear. “She chuckles and says, ‘ok, let’s give it a try.’ That means I just unloaded a school bus full of colorful information, when a shopping cart would have been necessary.”

Lisa has endured other setbacks, including a serious car accident in 2000, leading to a hip replacement just three years ago. Lisa was hit while crossing the street to catch a bus to go to work. She was flipped through the air over two lanes of traffic, and eventually broke the windshield of another car with her face. “I knew I would be run over or I could jump on the hood. Because of my dancing I had the physical ability and quickness to jump for the hood.” She lost an eye and had a tooth implant. As if that wasn’t enough challenge, Lisa also suffers from Meniere’s Disease, which attacks her vestibular system and balance. Today she continues to exercise to restore balance and “get my pieces and parts” back on track. “Your body has to be ready to do technique with enough control of body and balance. Markus stresses this. You need to know how your body will react. I’m always trying to do things that enhance my body’s ability to be flexible, strong, and to move,” she said.

Lisa loves the joy of ballroom competitions. “I’ll never forget my first Snow Ball. It was an amazing event and

I experienced success. Part of it was I was determined that our studio have a good showing, so I encouraged lots of people to go. Our studio got a trophy that year, still on display at the Des Moines Ballroom. It is a special trophy because we were all in it together.”

Lisa continued, “I love rooting and cheering for other people. I remember what [rooting] meant to me in my first competition; to this day I’ll never know who it was rooting for me. It was some studio from Canada and they didn’t know me from Adam. This is what sportsmanship is all about—to root and support people in their perfection and their beauty and their performance on the floor.”

And challenges on the competition floor? “I really don’t consider Lisa being challenged,” said Markus. “She is fully capable of accomplishing everything and anything she sets her mind to. I sometimes take for granted the extra effort that is required for her.” And Lisa? “My big fear on the competition dance floor is that I have really long arms, and I’m afraid I’m going to whack somebody. I feel terrible when that happens—I feel like the jolly green giant.” She has another unique challenge—her face. “I did IT work. I’m used to sitting in front of a computer

by myself and I didn’t have to smile or interact or show expression to anybody. Have you heard of RBF—Resting Bitch Face? Well, I have one. Some people will practice with their face in a mirror, but I don’t have that option. If I’m concentrating a lot, it shows all over my face and it doesn’t look like I’m having a good time.”

As Lisa waits for her COVID-19 vaccination to get back on the dance floor, the 70-year-old exercises 3-4 hours per day and practices at home. She hasn’t danced since March. “I’ll be so excited to get back...I just want to fly across the floor again.”

So many setbacks, yet such positivity. Thank you, Lisa, for rooting for me and so many others on the competition dance floor. Please know that many of us are rooting for you—on and off the dance floor. You inspire us with your perfection and beauty—both inside and out.

Ember Reichgott Junge is an amateur ballroom dancer and retired Cofounder of Heart of Dance. She is writing a book entitled “Stories of Resilience from the Ballroom Dancer’s Heart.” She welcomes ideas for inspiring stories at ember.reichgott@gmail.com. **E**



Jonathan Wolfram and Samantha Peterson.

Photo by the Minnesota Ballroom Blast Photography Team.