

I NOTICED HER RIGHT AWAY AS she competed with her teacher Scott Anderson at the Silver level at the 2022 Snowball DanceSport Competition. Her dancing was elegant and graceful, and she seemed to float on the dance floor. Her smile was mesmerizing and her performance authentic and natural. She didn't have the "expected" body type of a dancer, nor did she wear glitzy ballroom attire; but that didn't seem to matter. She placed well in her competition heats.

I introduced myself as a fellow student of Scott Anderson. Cindy Snyder told me she started taking private lessons with Scott just three months prior in October of 2021. Now 56 years old, she hadn't danced for over twenty years. She and Scott didn't have time to learn routines for Snowball, so she danced Smooth and Rhythm by lead/follow.

Yes, Cindy has been performing as a dancer in multiple ways since she was five years old. But like many of us, life happens, and dancing stops. Some of us wistfully wish we could dance again, but we don't. We have all manner of reasons: the kids, spousal issues, intense work, increased weight, or lack of body fitness. We have the passion, but we don't act upon it.

Not Cindy. That's what inspires me most about her. Any one of those life reasons could have applied to Cindy, but she came back to dance because passion called her back. And camaraderie.

"Everyone has been so welcoming to me," she said.

That includes her instructor, who happened to be substitute-teaching a Salsa class one night at the Burnsville Studio when Cindy decided to try it in July of 2021.

"The mall doors were locked, so Scott was waiting for people to come to class. He didn't know who was

Returning to Dance Long After "Life Happens"

BY EMBER REICHGOTT JUNGE

coming," recalled Cindy. "Scott opened the door for me and looked at me. 'I know you.....Cindy, right?' He knew my name, and I hadn't seen this man for thirty years! Is that not funny or what?"

That brings us to Cindy's dance history. As a child, Cindy took all styles of dance: tap, jazz, ballet, baton twirling, marching corps, and acrobatics. She joined a prestigious Eagan studio team called "Ranchettes" for ten years, marching in numerous parades, including the Aquatennial and Winter Carnival parades ("man, that was cold!") When she was about 14 years old, the Ranchettes won the 1980 International Baton Twirling Championship in Hawaii.

"It was so fun," she recalled. "We twirled hoop batons, lighted batons, two batons, swords, two knives....yes, knives this big!" she said, illustrating with her hands.

Cindy danced through high school and was selected for the Showtime USA Touring Company at Burnsville High School her senior year. They toured federal prisons throughout the Midwest with a variety show of song and dance. They were the only high school group sanctioned to do this.

Cindy gained confidence and presentation skills. Work ethic, too. She rehearsed at 7:00 a.m. every morning, including Saturdays, and spent all day Saturdays dancing and doing production work during show season.



Cindy Snyder competes with Instructor Scott Anderson at Snowball Dancesport Competition in January of 2022. Photo provided by Cindy Snyder.

Cindy was introduced to extracurricular ballroom dance in 1990, at Creighton University in Nebraska. She danced the one semester it was offered before she graduated and returned to the Twin Cities, with her Bachelor's Degree in Exercise Science.

Now what? Health clubs offered her minimum wage \$8.00 per hour jobs to answer phones and work up to a position as a personal trainer. Not for Cindy. She answered an ad for a training class for Fred Astaire Dance Studios in 1991. She was one of only four trainees out of twenty to make it through weeks of unpaid training. The training circulated through the Twin Cities Fred Astaire studios, including the Bloomington studio then owned by Scott and Amy Anderson. Yes, thirty years ago!

Cindy was first trained in "Social Ease," which she says compares to Preliminary Bronze at best. She learned lead and follow parts. She taught new students and attended dance training sessions every day. She tested through certification exams.

"These are very hard, rigorous tests," said Cindy. Tests could be eight hours long. Candidates test through twelve dances, ten to fifteen figures for each dance, dancing both the lead and follow parts solo. Candidates describe the footwork and characteristics of each dance. Cindy successfully tested through various levels "years and years ago," before the syllabus was revised to incorporate more complex figures.

Cindy married a fellow Fred Astaire trainee and they moved to Nebraska to accept teaching positions in Lincoln and Omaha from 1992 to 1993. In January of 1994, they bought the Wichita, Kansas Fred Astaire Studio and ran that studio for six years, until the year 2000. But by then, life was taking its course. They had one son who was diagnosed at two years old with

acute lymphocytic leukemia, requiring four and a half years of chemotherapy treatments. Things were falling apart at home, leading to divorce. Cindy was forced to close the studio because working evenings was considered a negative factor in Kansas for gaining custody of her son.

"I ended up having to let it go. It was devastating; I hated it. I tried to sell [the studio], but Wichita is off the beaten path of the dance community," she said.

Cindy taught out the remaining dance lessons, even at her own expense. Her son, Robert, completed chemotherapy treatments; today he is 27 and has had no cancer recurrence. Cindy gravitated toward tax work, because she helped her CPA father prepare tax returns as a teenager. She worked call centers in Kansas, trained people in tax work, and took her exam as an enrolled agent in 2010. When her father sold his practice in 2010, the new owner offered to hire Cindy, so she went back to the Twin Cities to work as a tax preparer.

By now, Cindy had been out of dance for a decade. She started teaching a few group classes at the community center, but it wasn't enough.

"That was fun, but there was no performance, no gatherings, no big parties. Not the fun stuff," Cindy said. "Dance is fun no matter when you do it or how you do it, but the thing that attracts me is the camaraderie, the people, the glitter, the fun stuff. That's what calls me back every time."

Cindy remarried in 2013. Again, life happened, and she decided to stop her community class teaching to assist with her husband's treatment and recovery from substance abuse. While she is very proud that he is now six years sober and tobacco free, "his health paid a price and he is disabled

now," she said. She limits her current dancing to one night a week.

Other life changes were happening. Now in her 50s and sitting at a desk all day doing tax returns without much exercise, it was easy to gain weight. Her body is no longer that of the dance teacher in her 20s.

"It's a constant battle trying to get back into any kind of shape to dance," Cindy said. "And it hits me in the confidence-side of things, because it is harder for me. You don't feel the same gracefulness or that same sophistication. In some dances where things are supposed to be sexy or sensual, you just don't feel that at this weight. I'm just not at the level of fitness that I'm used to for dance."

Cindy credits her current dancing for initial weight loss, greater focus on eating habits, and improved endurance.

"When I came back in July, I was twenty pounds heavier than I am now," recalled Cindy in May of 2022. "I couldn't dance a whole song of anything when we first started doing this. Initially we would do a dance, take a break, do a dance, take a break. Now we can dance the whole time, one after the other. It's taken time, and you just have to keep at it."

The Snowball DanceSport Competition in January was the real test. Cindy thought she was signing up for one dance at a time, like one Waltz, one Tango, etc.

"But no! We did them in rounds and you did 1, 2, 3, 4 in a row. Oh my gosh, I could not speak at the end because I didn't have any air." She continued, "Rhythm, same thing. Even though we were only doing a minute at a time, when you do five in a row, and you've got the adrenaline going, and you've got an audience, you are really sucking wind by the time you get to the end of it. It was really fun, but I had a hard time with it initially. It is much easier

now. Much, much easier now. I think it's because of the conditioning."

And Cindy's goal now? "Well, I would love to get back to a good dancing weight. For me, I need to lose probably another fifty pounds. It's gonna take a couple more years. So I will just keep dancing every week and stay positive. I think that helps a lot; it helps with less stress in your life. I would love to continue competing forever, until I can't."

Scott Anderson encourages Cindy to do it for herself. "It's a pleasure to work with Cindy. I could see her skill in group class. If I didn't have enough leaders she was happy to step in and be a leader. She hears the music, and she moves across the floor really nicely, holding her posture and holding her body so she's balanced."

Scott continued, "She's a good ambassador for the dance community. And she's willing to help out beginners. That alone will help her become a better competitive dancer herself. She's giving back to others and helping

them, and that's going to make her stronger as well."

For Cindy, competitions are a fun tool to improve her dancing. "I think you have to compare yourself to yourself and look at your scores and compare to how you did the last time or the last dance and try and improve from there. I don't think it is me against somebody else. It's more yourself against yourself. That's where the benefit of competition is. Plus it's a pageant. It's a fun outlet, where everybody gets to be all dolled up and dressed up. They all get to be ladies and gentlemen. They get to treat each other nicely. It's such a departure from society right now."

What would Cindy tell others who want to get back to their dance passion of years ago? "Anybody can do it. The nice thing about ballroom dancing is that you can come to it at any level and improve from any level. So just dance!" she said.

And for those who do not have a dancer's body? "It doesn't matter,"

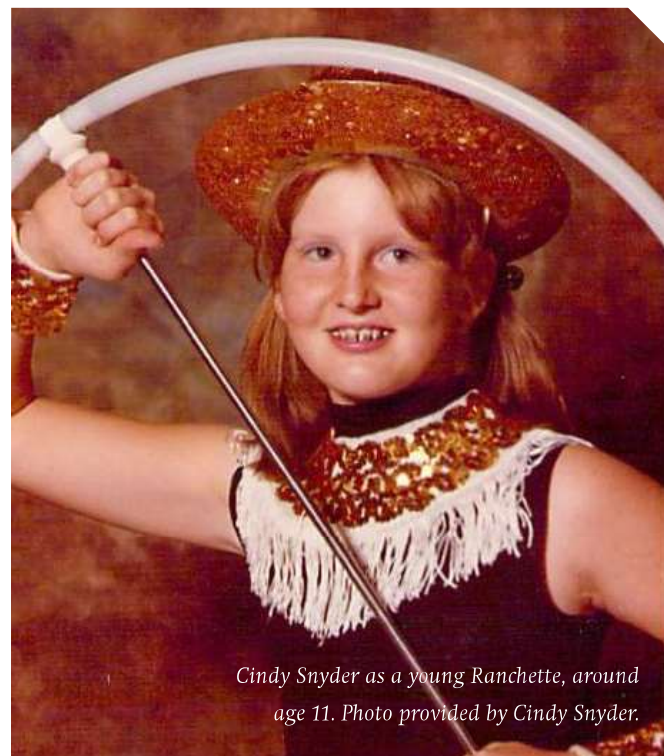
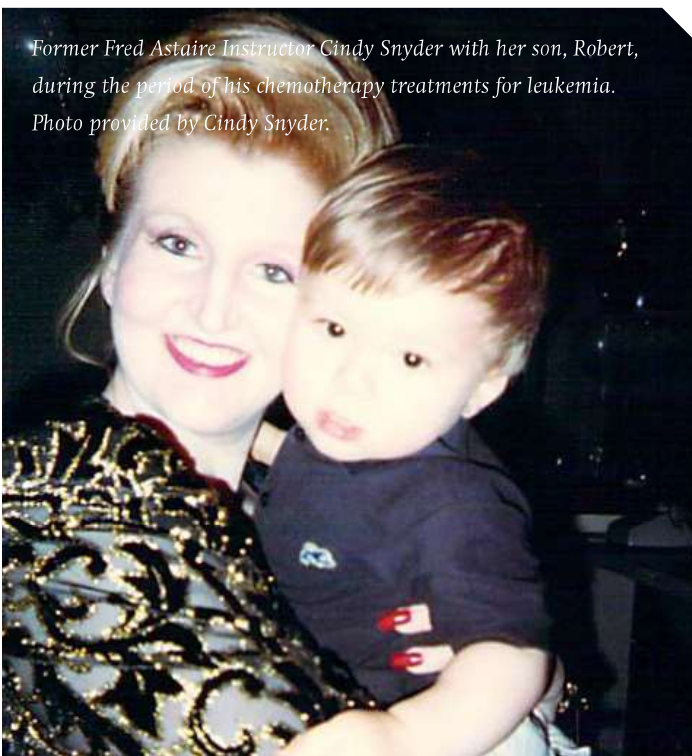
Cindy said. "It doesn't matter because you're not out there necessarily to put on a show. You are dancing for you. Look at the inventor of the Peabody. They named a dance after him and he was a very barrel-chested, portly guy. I think *everybody* should dance!" Lieutenant William Frank Peabody was encouraged to dance with his partners slightly off to his side because his stomach extended beyond his waistline.

And Cindy's dance future? "I wish I could dance more because I think it would help more. But you have to start wherever you are. It helps me to look at my dancing as a process that I can build on over time. I look at more experienced dancers and I say, 'I want to do that.' Someday I will!"

No one will doubt that.

Ember Reichgott Junge is an amateur competitive ballroom dancer and retired co-founder of the nonprofit Heart of Dance. She invites story ideas for her book-in-progress, tentatively titled Stories of Resilience from the Ballroom Dancer's Heart. E

Former Fred Astaire Instructor Cindy Snyder with her son, Robert, during the period of his chemotherapy treatments for leukemia. Photo provided by Cindy Snyder.



Cindy Snyder as a young Ranchette, around age 11. Photo provided by Cindy Snyder.