

Spouses on Terminal Health Journeys Will Dance 'til the End Their Unique Costumes are Available for Halloween and Showcases

BY EMBER REICHGOTT JUNGE



Roger and Melinda Martin dressed up as Gandalf and Galadriel from Middle Earth.



Melinda and Roger Martin dressed up as Mrs. and Mr. Boo.



Roger and Melinda Martin dressed up as Pirates of the Caribbean. Photos by Melinda Martin.

“COSTUMES ARE A HOOT!”

When Roger and Melinda Martin entered the dance floor, you always noticed. They were known for their color-coordinated, matching dance outfits, including Roger’s colorful silk jackets, ties and pocket squares that always matched Melinda’s dance dress. When they started taking annual dance trips and cruises with Dancers Studio over 18 years ago, they created costumes to match trip themes. Their amazing costumes are intricate, detailed, and would make any designer smile.

During thirty years of social dancing, the couple chose not to compete or participate in showcases because they didn’t like the pressure. “We knew we weren’t going to have competition clothes. So I started collecting. Roger decided everything had to be color-coordinated,” Melinda said. She credits Roger as the “creative juice” behind the costumes. “Roger is the one even

more driven and even more involved in the selections than I am,” she said.

The dancing couple, now 74, has entire closets filled with dance clothes and costumes made for dancing any style. Their most famous (ghostly) costume is Mr. and Mrs. Boo, which won no fewer than six first place prizes at Halloween costume parties. Melinda says it takes about an hour to get into one of their intricate costumes.

“Costumes are a hoot!” smiled Melinda. “It is so much fun. I have all my dance creations. We’ll never use them. We have so many costumes for sale. We want others to get the enjoyment out of them.”

The couple can’t use the costumes anymore because they don’t fit into them. Their bodies have changed as they’ve battled terminal health issues.

“I’m Not Going to Live in God’s Waiting Room”

Yes, both Roger and Melinda know they don’t have much time left, but

they don’t choose to live in that mindset. They keep going. They always plan for more things to do: mainly dance and travel.

Melinda has lived with terminal heart failure for fifteen years. She “died twice” before being resuscitated, the first time in 2008 on the ballroom dance floor at Twin Cities Open Ballroom Championships (TCO) (as detailed later in this article). For the past three years, Melinda has worn 15 pounds of electrical equipment called an “LVAD” (left ventricular assist device) just to keep her heart pumping. That’s the only way she stays alive. She can’t fit into those beloved costumes any longer. Today, her dance wear must allow room for the special vest she wears that is filled with metal components, tubes, and wires. And that will never change. The LVAD is normally only used as a “bridge” for a person waiting for a heart transplant. But Melinda’s body is not eligible for

a transplant, so the LVAD is her only option to live. She lives a difficult, painful, and exhausting, limited life. It is not a good life. But, as she says, you make it a good life.

Roger is currently recovering from Stage II pancreatic cancer, diagnosed in the summer of 2021. He lost significant weight during his chemotherapy and subsequent surgery. He's still only at half of his normal energy level. The good news is he's currently cancer free after chemotherapy and surgery, and he says he has a good shot at "a few more years." A miracle, says Melinda, but even with Stage II diagnosis and cancer-free lymph nodes, pancreatic cancer almost always comes back.

What is so remarkable about this couple is that through all the years of severe medical trauma for Melinda and the recent cancer diagnosis for Roger, they maintained their dance schedule of lessons as best as they could. They continued to travel on yearly dance trips whenever possible.

"We were driven through this to dance and travel," said Roger. "And that certainly provided [the drive] especially for Melinda, whose love of dance is unmatched. I think it provided Melinda a pathway to navigate and negotiate all of this [expletive!]" he added.

Their travel is not stopping anytime soon. "I'm not going to [stop planning] because we are going to die," said Melinda. "We are both dying. There is no question about that. But I have three Viking cruises booked, paid for, and planned, and I have no intention of canceling until the very last day. We won't have anything if we don't plan. You are just living in God's waiting room. I'm not going to live in God's waiting room. I'm going to go out and play. And dance and play, whether I breathe well or not."

The couple is grateful to have the resources to do this. "We are using

them in a way we never planned because we know both of us are terminal," continued Melinda. "We don't need a certain amount [of income] from our portfolio every month until we are 101. So we changed the way we used our portfolio. We gave ourselves the means to travel in a way we need to, which is first class. On a cruise ship we need a whole suite, because of the LVAD. I need space; I need room. I don't fit anywhere but first class with all the equipment I have to wear."

"I Dropped Dead on the Ballroom Dance Floor"

Roger and Melinda have danced since the first day they met, when they were computer matched as University of Minnesota freshmen during Welcome Week. Their first dance was September 22, 1966, to *Moon River*. They married in June of 1970, upon graduation from college.

They continued to dance "freestyle" for many years. Around 1999, with just one of two children still at home, Roger initiated the "gift to ourselves" to take ballroom dance lessons at Dancers Studio. Said Roger, "We had talked about it casually, and I just decided to follow up on it. I wanted to act on that dream that we discussed between us many times." Melinda's younger brother, Glen Lindgren, was a student at the studio, having started ballroom dance in the University of Minnesota Ballroom Dance Club.

Dance brought relief for the couple from their many working hours. Roger ran a consulting engineering business (Martin Pevzner Engineering), and Melinda was a media specialist and librarian for Eagan Public Schools. They loved their dance lessons. And while they didn't compete themselves, they attended TCO each year to support their Dancers Studio friends.

It was at TCO on July 11, 2008, that Melinda first learned that she had health issues. She had no earlier "hint of anything." She and Roger danced four times during the opening Friday night general dance, just prior to the formation team competition. Melinda stood on the side of the floor cheering on her Dancers Studio friends in the first ensemble. As they finished, without warning, Melinda fell to the floor. "I simply dropped dead," she said. "I had ventricular fibrillation, which is sudden death for a heart. You do not survive this whether you are in a hospital or not."

Her dancer brother was there and started the breathing side of CPR. A doctor student from Dancers Studio jumped into action with chest compressions. In the first of several miracles, the next ensemble of dancers ready to go on the floor consisted of eight physicians and nurses from Mayo Clinic in Rochester. They ran top speed diagonally across the huge ballroom floor at the (then) Radisson South Hotel to assist in CPR. As they waited for the EMTs, they never got a sign of life. *No sign of life from Melinda for nine minutes, forty-six seconds.* The EMTs came and made two hits with the defibrillator. At last: a breath and a heartbeat.

"Those doctors and nurses never stopped. They never stopped the blood flowing," said Melinda. "Since I actually did come back to life, I didn't have brain damage or heart damage. That was solely on them."

Roger continued, "We were told by the nurses at Fairview Southdale that the chances of survival from what Melinda experienced were less than 1%, and that was if they were already in the hospital. You are looking at a miracle. It just does not happen."

Doctors eventually discovered that Melinda had a virus in her body from when she was a child, born in Japan

and raised in Germany. The virus caused a cold that decimated her body and left her with a very weak heart, though she experienced no symptoms. So surgeons placed a defibrillator into Melinda which would shock her heart back to life if it happened again.

That virus was just getting started in wreaking havoc in Melinda's body. Just three years later she was diagnosed with breast cancer, forcing her to quit her job, to save her heart. She had seven surgeries for skin cancer. The breast cancer recurred in 2016, resulting in a double mastectomy. That same year, Melinda had massive surgery for a condition known as Type 3 achalasia of the esophagus, plus failure of a valve that allows food into the stomach. All were caused by the virus. The latter surgery was delayed because she was in a back brace for five months recovering from a smashed vertebrae that occurred while dancing with Roger on a dance trip in Puerto Vallarta. Finally, in 2019, her heart gave out a second time, resulting in the difficult decision to implant the LVAD for the rest of her life.

The virus prevented her from ever becoming eligible for a heart transplant.

“Life Changes When you Die and Come Back”

Through all of this, Melinda continued to dance. “I can dance through anything!” she smiled. “The way Mayo Clinic put it is you create your own wellness. I made sure I did everything to be as well as I could so I could keep dancing.” How did she do that? “I don't know. You just do it. Your life changes, not just as a person but as a couple when you die and come back. I had to retire early. To me, then, that was the beginning for Roger and me to make significant changes and add significant wonderful things to our life. Dancing

and travel. Like a bucket list. I finished that bucket list.”

One change they made was to not wait until their 50th wedding anniversary to have a celebration of their 1970 wedding. “No way would I have lived,” said Melinda. They were coming up on their 40th anniversary, so they pulled out all the stops for a big 40th anniversary celebration.

They decided to dance their first-ever showcase at the celebration, to the music of their first dance, *Moon River*. They spent eight months working on a Silver Waltz routine with instructor Jill Johnson. “We nailed it to perfection,” said Roger. “Every move of every part of our body was choreographed and practiced again and again for eight months.”

“It was wonderful!” interjected Melinda.

“It was one of the most exhilarating experiences I've ever had,” continued Roger. “We are both complete perfectionists. Jill told us she was trying to bring us down to reality; that we would have a glitch or a bobble. We did not. It was perfect.”

Melinda did live to their 50th anniversary in 2020, but she would not have

been able to do that waltz showcase. She's lived with the LVAD for three years, and Roger has to dance differently with her now. There are moves they can no longer do. “We've learned how to adapt all the way through my heart failure with much help from instructors,” said Melinda. “You adapt and you pace, you adapt and you pace, because of my breathing. It is almost like learning to dance all over again. My biggest problem besides fatigue and chest pains is shortness of breath.”

Remember those costumes that the Martins have available to sell? It seems they take on new meaning in the context of their remarkable story. They symbolize a love of dance that few other couples have ever experienced. And the resilience of this couple is likely sewn into every garment, a true gift to pass on to their new owners.

Ember Reichgott Junge is an amateur competitive ballroom dancer and co-founder of the nonprofit Heart of Dance. Readers interested in purchasing Roger and Melinda's costumes may contact Melinda at Melindamartin01@gmail.com or 612-309-0348. E



Roger and Melinda Martin dressed up as Disco Dancers. Photos by Melinda Martin.



Roger and Melinda Martin dressed up as a Pharaoh and Cleopatra.



Roger and Melinda Martin dressed up as a wizard and witch.