

## Finding the Right Dance Practice Partner

### Spoiler Alert: It May Not be Your Life Partner

BY EMBER REICHGOTT JUNGE

#### Dr. John Carlson

THE ADMINISTRATION AND EXECUTIVE committee of a small town Catholic hospital were in an uproar. The Chief of Surgery was ballroom dancing with the Head Surgical Nurse on a regular basis. Both were married to other people.

“They went through the ceiling,” recalled Dr. John Carlson about his experience around 2006. “Everyone was upset, figuring that Linda and I could not be dance partners together without doing other things. They thought they got it, but they didn’t.” He was called to the administrator and to the executive committee meeting to explain.

“You folks really feel that men and women cannot be friends and cannot be dance partners in contact with each other without having other things in mind,” he told them. “I play basketball and softball with a bunch of guys. If it was guys, you wouldn’t be unhappy about this. You’re unhappy because Linda is a woman and I’m a man and we are touching each other and embracing in a dancing sort of way.”

Dr. Carlson told the committee in no uncertain terms that this was the way it was going to be and they could stop asking him about it anytime. He was not going to tolerate it more, since “we’ve done nothing wrong.” The committee relented. John and Linda were given permission to practice in the hospital in an empty room that wasn’t being used for other purposes.



*Maryann, John, Mary Jo, John's wife, and Linda (John's former dance partner) in 2019. Photo provided by Maryann Kudalis and Dr. John Carlson.*

The truth was that both John and Linda were in delightful marriages and the four were social friends. John and his wife Mary Jo (today a marriage of 51 years) had danced for a few years in a community class with Deanna Constantine and loved it until John broke his leg in 1981. Dancing went dormant for them until they were invited to a wedding for Linda and her husband, Scott's, son around 2005. They decided to take swing lessons together so they could dance at the wedding.

“We quickly figured out that, of the four of us, Scott didn’t want to be practicing dance because it was like work,” said John. “And Mary Jo couldn’t practice much because she had bad knees and a bad back and it was too painful for her. Linda and I found that we both wanted to practice and dance

well and to dance technically correctly, which goes with our Type A personalities when you are in surgery. There’s a right way to do it and you want to be doing it the right way all the time.”

John and Linda took lessons and practiced a few times a week. They didn’t dance socially. “We pushed real hard to get the full Silver Syllabus under our belts, and to use a full syllabus in our dances. So that’s where I was and still am,” said John.

#### Maryann Kudalis

While John was practicing dance with Linda, Maryann Kudalis was discovering the dance community. Her husband Tim Kudalis was a Rotarian, so both were involved in Rotary International youth exchanges. When that led to dance activities for the youth, the dancing bug bit Maryann. In



Maryann Kudalis and Dr. John Carlson compete at Twin Cities Open Ballroom Championships in 2022. Photo provided by Maryann Kudalis and Dr. John Carlson.

fall of 2010, she started Salsa and West Coast Swing lessons at Social Dance Studio, and she joined a Nightclub Two-Step formation team with just one lesson under her belt.

“I was the worst dancer on the team,” laughed Maryann. “I was so stressed out that I lost thirty pounds in less than six months. I was dancing constantly trying to learn Nightclub Two-Step and the routine. I had no clue how to turn. I knew nothing about dancing, absolutely nothing. I was dancing constantly just to get the correct steps to perform. That’s what got me going; I got to know people on my team. I ended up with really close friends from that team.” They guided her into the dance world, with coaching from men on the dance floor and tips about places to go dance.

Maryann’s husband, Tim, wasn’t exactly thrilled. Maryann was working all day as a special education teacher and would dance at night for lessons and rehearsals for the formation team. She hardly ate. Tim finally decided to start dancing two years later, “when he got tired of me being gone all the time,” said Maryann.

Maryann thought her husband was a more coordinated dancer than she was. However, Tim was battling a number of health challenges, including diabetes and heart disease, with multiple heart attacks (the first at age 30). They danced together for only about four or five years, before Tim became terminally ill and died in January of 2017.

The dance community became Maryann’s safe place to take much-needed breaks from caregiving. A dance friend connected her to a hospice. They

were the people she talked with and cried with as her husband neared the end. When her husband passed, the dance community physically embraced her with hugs, wrote lovely cards, and came to the memorial service, even if they didn’t know Tim. “It was just incredible. The dance community was huge, really huge, in their support of me,” she told me as she struggled with tears.

## The Dance Technician and Social Dancer Find Each Other

John and Maryann first met around 2018 at the weekly group dance classes hosted by Instructor Scott Anderson. John usually attended with Linda, but Linda started having knee problems and more pain with dance. It was uncomfortable for her to practice. Meanwhile, Maryann, now widowed, was attending the classes regularly to have fun. “It was hilarious to talk to each of the different men,” she recalled. “I loved rotating because they are all so different and some days they would crack me up. You end up having a connection with most people in the circle. And with John, I thought we matched pretty well size-wise [both of us are tall], and we were dancing together pretty well. I finally asked him if he was interested in practicing with me, because I was looking for a practice partner.”

Maryann knew first-hand the importance of finding the *right* dance practice partner. “John was the first dance partner I had who didn’t make my cry,” she told me. Her first dance partner made her anxious. “Sometimes I was crying because I was not doing what he wanted me to do, or it was my fault that it didn’t go well. That’s one reason why I felt it was an unhealthy thing. There were a lot of positives about it, but I would always have high



anxiety. If you have the wrong partner, it's just so unhealthy in so many ways."

Maryann moved on to a second partner, who appeared to be a "quiet, nice man." But as they danced and spent more time together socially, he decided he wanted to be her boyfriend, and started experiencing psychotic episodes. "It was so scary when he had an episode," said Maryann. John, who was around at the group classes, was concerned about her safety.

So, John was the right partner for Maryann at the right time. John's dance partner Linda and wife Mary Jo couldn't have been more supportive. "[John] was practicing with Linda when we first started," said Maryann. "What's funny about it is that for our first showcase, I was wearing Linda's dress, doing Linda's routines, and Linda came. And Mary Jo was absolutely there. I like her a lot, and she was taking pictures and videos of us. She was so supportive and so lovely." So there was John with all three women in his life enjoying dance as participants or audience members.

John and Maryann have now been dancing together for about four and a half years. They dance regularly about three hours per week, but they agree that family always comes first. Most recently they danced together for the October 30, 2022 Flashmob for USA Dance, Minnesota Chapter at the Mall of America. Maryann became President of the Minnesota Chapter earlier this year.

What I find most intriguing about this dance partnership is that John and Maryann are quite different in personality and come to dance from very different perspectives. It works for them. For John, the technician, he likes that Maryann is very interested in practicing and she's driven to do it correctly, just like he and Linda enjoyed. John is the more experienced and proficient dancer, and more detail oriented.

"John is way ahead of me," says Maryann. "Close enough" is fine for Maryann, but not good enough for the surgeon. "I'm not as technical or exact as John, by any means. He remembers so well and he narrates while we dance, especially as I'm learning, and I love that most of the time." John is not a stranger to teaching; medical students would follow him in his surgical practice for three months at a time.

Maryann is very happy to have John "in charge." For her, dance partnership is about friendship and community. "John has so much integrity that I feel safe with him. I feel everything is very proper. He is a friend and we can hug because we miss each other, and we've gotten to know each other so well. It's the ideal friendship dance partner to me."

As President of the Minnesota Chapter of USA Dance, Maryann is focused on introducing new people to the community of dance. She knows from experience that it's hard—and scary—to set foot in the door of a dance studio for the first time. But once you step inside it is familiar, everybody is friendly, and you dance with a variety of people. It is especially welcoming for people who are widowed or divorced, like her. "It's cheaper than a date and you aren't stuck with someone for an hour over dinner or coffee. You don't have to figure out ways to leave when you aren't comfortable. Thirty seconds. Rotate, rotate, rotate. It's a safe environment for single people. You can go alone and it's OK, especially for older women."

As individuals, John and Maryann each experienced great health benefits from their love of dance. John, who played basketball and softball for years, developed painful knees with a meniscus tear and soft cartilage. Knee replacements appeared inevitable and he had to stop downhill skiing.

When he started ballroom dancing, he couldn't dance a Tango because it was too uncomfortable to put weight on a bent knee for that low, lateral motion.

"But with ballroom dancing regularly, and practicing hard, the strength around your knee gets much, much stronger," said John. "The stability of the knee depends on the muscle strength around it, not just the ligaments that hold the knee." John found that with frequent dancing and practicing, his knee pain disappeared, and he hasn't had knee problems since. Now 72 years old and retired from medical practice, he goes downhill skiing five or six days a week at a nearby ski resort. Knee replacements? Not for John.

Maryann, now 71, benefitted physically in addition to the emotional support she received as she grieved. She is more physically fit, her balance has improved, and she stands up straight. "You walk like a dancer!" said John.

Maryann added, "My muscles are more defined now than as a young person, tall and skinny, like in my 20s. I'm strong. My back used to feel like it would go out on me every year; I haven't had problems with my back. The more I dance the more physically fit I am and the more willing I am to be lifting heavy boxes, gardening, and shoveling."

For John, dance is a technical sport. For Maryann, it is about community. For both it is about kindness and support for the other. And positivity. That's good advice for any partnership, whether friends or life partners.

*Ember Reichgott Junge is an amateur competitive ballroom dancer and cofounder of the nonprofit Heart of Dance. She is currently preparing her book manuscript of life stories of resilience from people who happen to be ballroom dancers. E*