

Dancing with Gratitude Down Memory Lane

BY RETIRING HEART OF DANCE CO-FOUNDER EMBER REICHGOTT JUNGE

TEN-YEAR-OLD EMILIO, DECKED OUT in his classy bow tie and dress pants, was practicing in the on-deck room when he panicked. He was about to dance in front of a packed Dancers Studio ballroom of parents and school teammates at the first Colors of the Rainbow Team Match ever hosted by Heart of Dance.

“I forgot the Tango—show me!” he railed excitedly, his eyes wide as he ran up to founding Heart of Dance board chair Dennis Yelkin. Dennis smiled.

“Ask your mother to dance and I’ll show you.”

Emilio quickly calmed down as he reviewed the steps with his mother. Satisfied, he ran back to the ballroom, then hesitated, and turned back to his mother.

“Thank you, mom!” he said, happily joining his 5th grade partner.

His mother, visibly moved with tears in her eyes, told Dennis: “That is the first time he ever thanked me for anything. He’s never done that before.”

I’ll never forget that day in December 2015. More than 100 fifth grade students on 11 teams jammed Dancers Studio, creating one of the most ethnically diverse ballroom scenes I’ve seen in the Twin Cities.

“Their families and friends brought the enthusiasm, shouting and clapping, as if it were an Olympic event,” wrote Star Tribune reporter Kristin Tillotson.

These young “Olympians” were judged not just on dance steps, but on new-found confidence, teamwork, and multicultural and gender respect they

practiced over the past ten weeks in their schools.

Like Emilio, the students and educators of Minnesota had never done this before, and frankly neither had we. And though we have thanked many of you since then, we can never do it enough.

When Co-Founder/Co-President Andrea Miranda and I decided to seek a license from global Dancing Classrooms to bring partner dance to Minnesota students, we had a dream, but not much else. That didn’t matter. The ballroom dance community of Minnesota went all in for Heart of Dance. You believed in our dream. We



Ember Reichgott Junge



Ember Reichgott Junge with 8th grade student Ellie, who spoke at a Heart of Dance fundraising luncheon. Photo by Drew Anderson.

became the 30th global licensee of Dancing Classrooms in July 2015.

Friends and dancers created a founding board of directors so we could get our IRS nonprofit status for Heart of Dance. U Partner Dance (University of Minnesota Ballroom Dance Club) provided the critical generous start-up funding for our first year. USA Dance Minnesota Chapter leaders Joyce Thompson and Leslie Whitney recruited volunteers to become Classroom Assistants, a position never before seen in global Dancing Classrooms.

Together, five years later, we helped transform the lives of 8,706 fifth- and eighth-graders in the Twin Cities, Duluth, and Rochester at 75 partner schools. During that time, our professional ballroom dance teachers became volunteer “Pro Buddies” and visited our classrooms—often the most memorable experience for students of the ten-week residency. Our dance professionals became volunteer judges at our semi-annual Colors of the Rainbow Team Match; Nathan Daniels wowed us by judging eight of nine Team Matches (no 10th Team Match this

spring). USA Dance Minnesota Chapter, Cinema Ballroom, and Dancers Studio all hosted fundraiser events for Heart of Dance so we could grow and serve more classrooms. Several professional and amateur dancers undertook the intense week-long training to join our Heart of Dance team as Teaching Artists in the schools. Organizers of the Snow Ball and Twin Cities Open Dance Competitions offered complimentary tickets to our students.

Andrea and I could not be more grateful to the Minnesota ballroom community for believing in our dream of growing young leaders through partner dance. Leaders like Windom fifth-grader Sam, who gave up his spot at the Team Match, so his friend Luis could dance. Or Stonebridge fifth-grader Maya, who transformed from a suspended fourth grade student to a classroom leader in fifth grade and beyond through Dancing Classrooms. Or eighth-grader Ellie, who found in dance a purpose and joy that helped her overcome her depression and become a Classroom Assistant herself in DC Academy, a program for alumni of Dancing Classrooms. Or the fifth

grade team at Learning for Leadership Charter School, consisting of 90 percent Somali students, who won their Team Match, a cultural breakthrough for Heart of Dance and global Dancing Classrooms.

I could not be more proud of what we created together in Heart of Dance, but I always knew that at the end of five years, it would be time to retire and let others take the lead. On July 1, I move from staff to enthusiastic volunteer as Heart of Dance continues to grow new programming like our Dance for Life residency for seniors, a special passion of mine. And I will watch with awe as Andrea and the program team pivot to virtual programming to keep our students of all ages engaged physically, socially, and emotionally even in these changing times.

Thanks to all of you who donated your time and treasure to help us grow more leaders through dance. We could not have done it without you. We are also grateful to the many foundations and sponsors who believed in our mission, such as the Thomas and Julianne Youngren Foundation, St. Paul and Minnesota Foundations, F. R. Bigelow



Ember Reichgott Junge doing The Macarena with parents and students at a Colors of the Rainbow Team Match. Photo by C.J. Hurst.

and Mardag Foundations, Rochester Area Foundation, Ecolab and McNeely Foundations, The Lulu Foundation, Minnesota Regional Arts Council, JCI St. Paul, Thrivent Financial, Ideal Energies, and others.

Finally, my greatest appreciation goes to our amazing Heart of Dance staff team, Teaching Artists, board of directors and volunteers. Andrea and I received outstanding support from

the Senior Leadership Team of Carrie Sandgren, Janine Premil, Amy Hero Jones, and Frances Emberley. As original development lead, I couldn't be more proud of Director of Development Amy Hero Jones and her team of Rose Hartnett and Sydney Schoeberle.

Our Volunteer Engagement Committees consisted of enthusiastic ambassadors around the state, led by Joyce Thompson (Twin Cities), Dr.

Patricia Barrier (Rochester), and Sonja Vogen Baertsch and Andrea Kuzel (Duluth). Finally, a huge thanks goes to our board of directors: Dede Ouren (board chair), Dennis Yelkin (past chair), Cecily Hines, Greg Warner, Heather Harden, Jill Smith, Nell Collier, Shane Haggerty, Andrea Wilkerson, Mary Vanderwert, and Jonathan Brown. Past board members from the ballroom community include Ha Tuong, Chris Kempainen, Walter Hartell and Bob Sondag.

No, none of us has ever done this before. But together, we did it well. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. I can't wait to see what the next chapter of Heart of Dance will bring.

Heart of Dance has created a Legacy fund to honor retiring Co-Founder Ember Reichgott Junge and past Founding Board Chair Dennis Yelkin. You are invited to honor Ember or Dennis with a gift of any size by June 30 at www.heartofdancemn.org. E

Ember Reichgott Junge with a student at a Colors of the Rainbow Team Match. Photo by C.J. Hurst.



Ember Reichgott Junge dances with a Dance for Life student in a Heart of Dance senior residency at Abitan Mill City senior residence in downtown Minneapolis. Photo by Heart of Dance.



Students dance at a Colors of the Rainbow Team Match. Photo by C.J. Hurst.

