

*Regina Kim and her instructor Scott Anderson dance American Smooth at Starlight Classic in February of 2022. Photo provided by Regina Kim.*



## Stand Straight, Regina Kim

**“I Can Stand Straight Both Inside and Outside!” — Mother, Age 60, Emerges from an Abusive Marriage through Dance**

BY EMBER REICHGOTT JUNGE

I’VE WRITTEN BEFORE OF MID-LIFE married couples who find new joy together in ballroom dance after the kids leave the nest. But for Regina Kim, who never even knew ballroom dancing in her native Korea, dance was the unexpected remedy that lifted her out of her darkness and depression after her children left home and her increasingly abusive 25-year marriage ended.

Regina started this “totally new” dance experience at age 60 with

instructor Modie, who kept reminding her, “Regina, posture!”

Said Regina, “I realized you have to show off yourself. It gave me confidence that I could do this. That was a big joy! It’s like my self-esteem was coming back. I can do anything; this is my life, and I can express myself. I can stand straight both inside and outside. I realized I was the one who can make me stand straight, make me who I am, and make me a happy person.”

That was the person Regina was back in Korea, where she was a young career financial professional with a global company, poised to rise through the executive ranks. In that male-dominated Korean society, it was rare for a woman to have such a position in business.

“I was very proud of myself,” said Regina. “Everyone told me I was doing well, and my boss wanted to promote me.”

Then, life happened. Regina often connected with a girlfriend from Seattle who traveled to Korea monthly for her husband’s business.

“We were partying and drinking, and she asked if I had a boyfriend,” recalled Regina. “I said no. So, I gave her my business card and told her I’m willing to meet anyone if the right one is out there.”

A few months later, Regina received a detailed, five-page, handwritten letter in English with photos from a man in Minnesota who worked for a German company.

“I was completely shocked,” said Regina. “He even wrote one sentence in Korean. I didn’t know who he was.” In short, her girlfriend’s friend was partying with this man in a Korean bar in Seattle. He had a crush on her, though she was married. She told him, “If you would like to meet a girl from Korea, I know a really good one.”

Regina realized that the man who wrote the letter was serious. He wrote well and was well-educated. She wrote back, in part to practice and improve her English. Letters turned to phone calls, with nightly calls from Minnesota to Korea amounting to a long-distance phone bill of about \$1,000 per month.

“He was good at speaking, he had a really calm voice, my English was getting better, and he was really nice.” So Regina wanted to meet him in person. She arranged a trip to Canada to visit

her sister, and Bob (name changed for privacy) sent her a ticket to Minnesota. “We had a big rendezvous. He took me to his parents’ house and showed me around Minneapolis. During that time together, I was like a magnet.” She liked the way Bob’s father acted toward his wife, as “such a loving husband.” She thought that boded well for Bob.

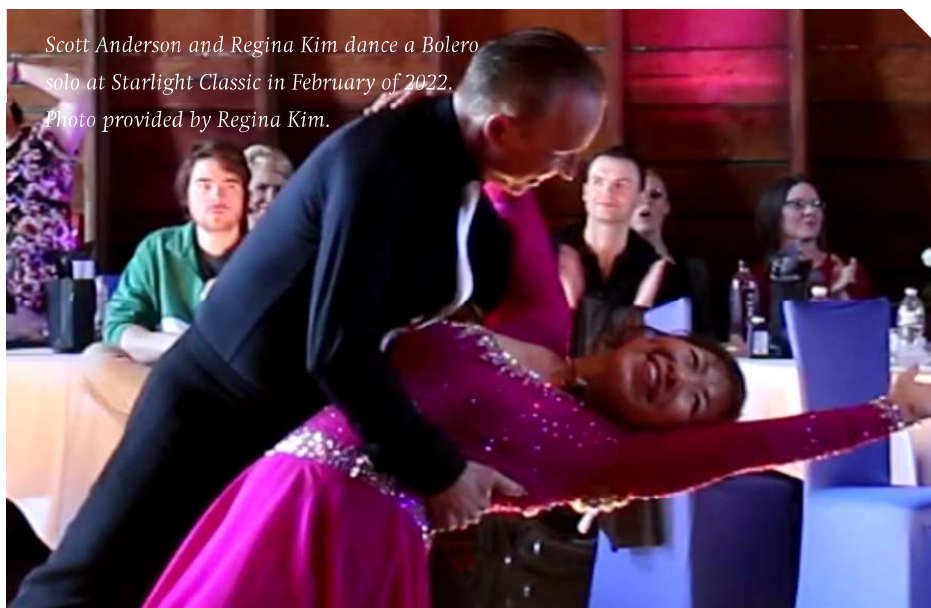
Bob proposed to Regina when she returned to Korea. She said yes, against advice from her parents and work colleagues, who said she was “crazy” to give up her family and career.

“I told my father, life is a kind of gamble,” said Regina. “I don’t have anyone I love now, and I really love this guy. He is from a good family, he is smart, and he can take care of me. I really want to start a family, and I always wanted to live somewhere other than Korea because I am curious and adventurous. I know I’ll be lonesome, but I can do anything. If I fail, I’ll come back and start again.”

Regina came to Minnesota in June of 1991, and the marriage occurred in two weeks. Bob prepared everything in advance for the wedding at his sister’s farmhouse. Regina’s only family in attendance was her sister from Canada and her sister’s boyfriend.

“That day, I was the happiest woman in the world,” recalled Regina. Bob and Regina had two children right away, Trever (now 30) and Allie (now 28). Regina worked for her husband’s business. Things were good for seven or eight years.

Then things started to drift apart, “like a little crack that grew bigger.” As Bob dominated the marriage, Regina tried to follow. She let go of her opinions; she became less extroverted and less “brave.” Though communication was an issue, she focused on her children. Problems became more evident after the kids left home. Regina was unhappy working with Bob, and she



*Scott Anderson and Regina Kim dance a Bolero solo at Starlight Classic in February of 2022. Photo provided by Regina Kim.*

had nowhere to go at the end of the workday.

“It was not a happy marriage,” Regina said. “He was putting me down in front of people, like the employees and our kids. They all knew it was not a happy marriage. And when we were both out together, I just couldn’t take it anymore.” Regina felt demeaned, especially when he would berate how she spoke English, her second language. Regina sought counseling. “The counselor asked me, ‘What would you do if your daughter was in a marriage like yours?’ I said I would get out. The counselor responded, ‘If you don’t get out, what message are you sending to your daughter and son?’

Then came March 27, 2015, when Regina crashed her car on a snowy and icy Highway 494. Though she was driving slowly, her car spun out of control, and she was seconds away from being smashed by a big pickup truck. “It was a miracle I wasn’t killed,” she said. Shaking from the shock, she called her husband, telling him she thought she was OK. He responded with an outburst: “Now I have *three* kids!” (including his wife). He was scolding

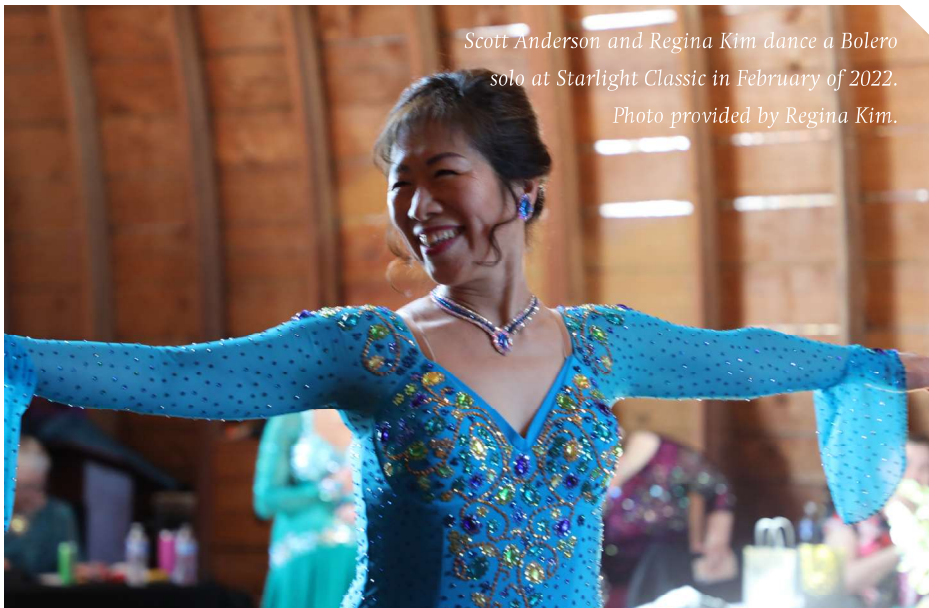
her and raging mad. “Will you pick me up?” she asked. “I guess so,” he replied. Thought Regina, “I felt like somebody was telling me there is clearly no love.”

The couple divorced in October of 2016. Regina was not working and she lived in a rented apartment. She felt empty but “light” at the same time.

“The reason I was depressed was that I had the highest self-confidence when I came here. This is not what I planned when I came to this country. I lost huge things. I was sad because all my dreams, my happiness, and my confidence about what I could do when I came over here was a closed chapter. Now the stage is closed and there is a new stage, but there wasn’t anything on the new stage. What am I going to do now? How can I start now? I feel light and free, everything is in my power, but how can I start my life back? I was losing weight and couldn’t sleep.”

Regina had no family in the United States, other than her children. She was now 60 years old. A friend suggested she try something she had never done before—dance—because “it makes you feel pleasant and connects you with people.” She suggested the





*Scott Anderson and Regina Kim dance a Bolero solo at Starlight Classic in February of 2022. Photo provided by Regina Kim.*

dance parties at DanceLife Ballroom in Richfield.

So Regina went to her first dance dressed in blue jeans and tennis shoes. Regina knew nothing; she had no idea what foot the lady started on. Gentlemen would try to help, but they wouldn't ask her to dance again.

Regina started taking lessons at the studio, learning American Rhythm and Smooth dances. "I was hooked," said Regina. "I just loved it. It was a totally different world, a totally different life. It was something I had never done and never thought I would. When I finished a lesson I thought, 'Wow, I can do this!' Getting encouragement, listening to music, and meeting people helped me get out of the darkness and depression. And it was really good for my body, having the right posture and movement."

Learning to "stand straight" made Regina confident, happier, and healthier physically and emotionally. "That is the way I believe God wanted me to live. It is also how I wanted to live for my lovely kids, because I am not their burden. I am me and a happy person," said Regina. She found employment as an accountant with Holy Spirit Catholic

Church and School in St. Paul, where she has worked for the last four years.

For Regina, dance is also about connecting with people. Said Regina, "When we dance there is a physical connection, we both listen to music, and we are coordinating together. That is a huge plus. Dance makes me invincible! I see as [a] benefit from all those micromovements that you connect with your brain and also connect with your heart. Music always brings me joy. With music you move your body, so that your heart [gets] warmed up."

Through dance, the extroverted Regina emerged again. She learned of a couples class being organized by dance instructor Scott Anderson, but she needed a partner. At an unrelated group class, she noticed that another student, Stefan, did Bolero, her favorite dance.

"So I said to Stefan, 'Hi, I'm Regina. They are having a couples class. Are you free Thursday evening?' Bolero was Stefan's favorite dance too. Regina and Stefan became dance partners in October of 2021.

Regina began taking lessons from Scott Anderson, and they performed her first showcase solo—a Bolero—at

the February of 2022 Starlight Classic. Regina doesn't want to compete; she wants to dance at showcases and join a formation team. She would love to visit senior housing or recreational parks to show others how dance can create happiness in their lives.

"I want to keep dancing as long as my body allows. As long as I can walk, I will be dancing. I want to die on the dance floor," laughed Regina.

Regina doesn't harbor regrets. If she hadn't come to the United States, she wouldn't have her children, who she adores. Yes, at first she was disappointed in herself and her decision to come here, asking herself, "What's wrong with me? Is there anything I did wrong? Should I have done something different to save the marriage?" She would see others with a seemingly smooth and happy life. "I've come to understand that everyone's life is different. I shouldn't compare myself. That is a big way to take my self-esteem down. I don't want to compare my life to others. I am who I am, and I owe it to myself and my kids to be a happy person."

Today, Regina lives with gratitude. "I told a friend, 'I'm a millionaire.' I have everything—all my body pieces are in their original places. I've not replaced anything in my body. There are so many people—billionaires—who have health and emotional problems. I can do so many things. I can dance, which I never believed would be part of my life. I don't know what I'd be doing now if I didn't dance."

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