

Life stories spin out of the ballroom

In August, I began taking ballroom dance classes. This column is the first of two that detail my experience:

On a recent Saturday afternoon, I watched 10 couples gather for a practice session at Ballroom East in St. Matthews.

One of the first couples I observed was a pair of children. The girl, 8, wore the kind of cute little heels that make all girly girls feel grown-up, and the boy's soft leather lace-ups resembled those of the older gentlemen in the room. They danced about one bar of the foxtrot, skinny legs moving together somewhat nervously. They danced a little farther apart from each other than they probably should have; they are still in that "cooties" stage.

I imagined this is what Chase Abell, 21, must have

looked like when he started dancing at age 6. You would never believe it, given the way the amateur division competitor and aspiring dance professional glides across the floor now.

Abell observed a class when Ballroom East began offering classes to children and found the challenge and fun of ballroom appealing.

These days, Abell's students provide fun, challenges and opportunities to grow. He acknowledged it can be frustrating when a student doesn't

understand the steps or routine "because I'm not giving them the best instruction they can have. But it's interesting because you really start thinking about how things are really supposed to be danced," and breaking down a step to its most basic form "makes you a better instructor."

During his 10 hours of teaching private lessons each week at the studio, he may use repetition, demonstration, diagrams or audio cues to help a student get it.

That Saturday, I witnessed Charles Jones, one of Abell's coaches, use all of those techniques, plus an analogy that explains how the central nervous system communicates movement to the joints, to guide the students.

"Sometimes people don't learn dancing like they learn something in school out of a textbook. Dance is very kinesthetic, very hands-on. Dance is how you recall information and communicate it to your body to do something," Abell said.

Jones described ballroom dancing as a combination of art and athleticism that "requires a lot of grace, finesse and understanding of the dynamics of body, mind and soul."

Jones began dancing as a teenager and went on to compete professionally for about 10 years. The art is easy to see and the effort that it takes to learn and perfect the craft untraceable as Jones and dance partner Linda Jackson demonstrate steps. Jackson, who owns the studio, acknowledged that the transition from dancing competitively to dancing for others as an instructor was difficult, but she now loves seeing other people become better dancers.

Abell can relate to the sentiment. He plans to own a dance studio in the future. Dance "brings out emotions in you," he said, adding that seeing the impact that learning to dance has on students' lives "makes me happy."

The impact isn't just on the dance floor. Nic Perry and Rebecca Gorman,

both 14, carry lessons from dance to their lives. The two are partners and have been competing for a little over a year, but both have been dancing since they were small children.

"It definitely teaches you patience," Rebecca said. "And to appreciate things, because when you dance, everything seems to slow down."

Nic added, "I think it strengthens you physically and mentally. Some dances are really difficult, so you have to learn how to push through them, no matter how much you want to stop."

I know I've hit those points. In three weeks, I'll share how I learned to push through them, and I'll share other life lessons from the dance floor. ♣

Mariam Williams is a Louisville native who writes about the random thoughts that hold her attention for two minutes or more.



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