

## The Climb

### “There’s Always Gonna Be Another Mountain”

BY EMBER REICHGOTT JUNGE



*Meghan Anderson Afonkin and Dr. Paul Cederberg.  
Photo provided by Ember Reichgott Junge.*

I SETTLED IN TO WATCH MY FRIENDS Dr. Paul Cederberg and his teacher Meghan Anderson Afonkin dance their showcase routine at a local dance event. I knew Paul, an orthopedic surgeon for over 35 years, as the consummate

gentleman. It was a joy to dance and socialize with him and his wife Mary at dance events. Perhaps this familiarity was why I was unprepared for what I saw. Paul started dancing in the middle of the dance floor to the song “The Climb” by Miley Cyrus, while Meghan

remained in the audience. This song was sung by Joe McElderry (winner of the British show “The X Factor”). Paul’s lyrical waltz-like movements—all by himself—showed strong control, balance, and technique at the Open Silver level. He danced solo for a full 45 seconds—rare in the ballroom world.

Then he paused for two musical phrases to reach down to lift his right pant leg above his knee, securing it to the Velcro he had personally sewn into the pant leg above. Paul revealed a prosthesis. We saw a leg with no fibula, virtually no calf, and two inches shorter than his left leg. I had no idea. Nor did many in the audience, who audibly gasped. Meghan danced out to join Paul on the dance floor and they joyfully launched into the most moving lyrical routine I’ve seen. Tears came to my eyes. So elegant, so smooth. Not a hint of any obstacle.

There’s always gonna be another mountain, I’m always gonna want to make it move. Always gonna be an uphill battle, Sometimes I’m gonna have to lose. Ain’t about how fast I get there, Ain’t about what’s waiting on the other side. It’s the climb.

The words of the song made perfect sense. Of course it had to be sung by a male. This was Paul’s story. Not just his dance story but his life story.

“The Climb is a metaphor for overcoming obstructions. Overcoming whatever is in your way or bothers you. Because we all have those problems. It is the theme of my life and everyone’s life. Literally, I’m living the dream. I’m

doing everything I've taken on as well as possible with God's grace," said Paul.

That doesn't make the experience any less emotional. "The last 30 seconds or so that I'm dancing with Meghan I'm losing it," acknowledged Paul. "I have to keep fighting not to cry. Afterwards I cry like a baby."

I asked Paul how hard it was for him to do the routine. A long pause ensued as he struggled to keep his composure. His eyes were teary as he took a deep breath.

"It was a scary decision. I'm still emotional about it. It was more emotionally hard than physically hard. When I make up my mind to do something, I do it. That's something I've learned by having a so-called disability. Which is not a disability. It was emotionally hard

to expose myself in front of all these people. My dream is to be normal."

He paused. "I'm getting close," Paul said softly. "My whole goal was to inspire other people. To tell a story. It was something I could do to show a disability but (also) show how it could be overcome with Meghan's help and help of other coaches."

Other coaches like Bree Watson, Paul's "doctor of dance," Nathan Daniels, and celebrity dancer Tony Meredith who cried the first time he saw the routine. ("On my tombstone I'll say I made Tony Meredith cry!" laughed Paul.) The emotion in Paul runs deep. Paul was born with a developmental birth defect. He has no fibula, four toes, and is missing other bones in his foot. He has a tiny bit of motion in his

ankle. He does have sensation in his foot which allows him to feel where the foot is in space. He depends on his knee to feel where the foot is. When he was born, doctors predicted that his leg would be five inches shorter than the other when he stopped growing at age 16.

"Dr. Harry Hall was my hero. He decided we could do something without amputating the foot, to my mother's great relief. He did several operations on my foot to get it into this position. When I was 12, they arrested the growth in my left femur. There is still a two-inch difference. They left a two-inch difference so I could be fit with a prosthesis."

That prosthesis is constantly updated. Currently, the materials in his prosthesis foot are made from helicopter rotors so they can bend and deform and go back to normal.

"I'm the only dancer with two right feet and I dance on helicopter parts," quipped Paul.

He doesn't even think about it when dancing with it. "I just adapted to it. The other day I was doing a hairpin turn and my brace broke. It's usually dependable. It's just something I'm used to."

Dr. Hall lives large in Paul's life. "Dr. Hall helped me," as Paul paused to control his emotions. "I'm laying in bed at age five recovering from the operation. Dr. Hall says, 'OK, Paul, wiggle your toes.' 'I can do this, Dr. Hall!' I did what Dr. Hall did. At that moment, at age five, I decided to be an orthopedic surgeon."

Paul never swayed from his dream. "That helped me to be disciplined, and very directed and focused toward my goal. My parents sent me to Breck School where I could participate in sports and academics. I was captain of my football, hockey and baseball teams. I played quarterback in football.



*Meghan Anderson Afonkin and Dr. Paul Cederberg's dance "The Climb" was the Twin Cities Open Ballroom Championships Top Solo of 2019. Photo by Marc James Anderson of Creek 44.*

I was a good skater. And an all-conference pitcher. It was perseverance. I just wanted to do what everybody else does. I always tell them I want you to teach me to dance as well as I can. That's the theme of my whole life—doing things as well as I can.”

Paul inspired his dance coaches, including Meghan.

“When I first met Paul he shared about his leg. As a teacher who never experienced something like this, it's scary at first. How am I going to be the best for Paul? But our partnership was quite natural as it developed. What I found is that I didn't have to teach Paul any differently. He amazed me from Day One. I would give him everything I knew, and he would try it and sometimes it didn't work and we'd have to adjust it. He never questioned anything. He always said 'Give me more.' He just wanted to be the best possible dancer he could be. I told him I was in it all

the way and I won't hold back because I don't need to.”

Meghan paused. “What was most moving for me was the choreography with Paul being out there by himself, not with me holding him, not with me there. I could see it in him, even when we practiced, how emotional this was for him. It was a huge triumph. For me to stand on the sideline and watch that before I appeared on the floor, I'll never forget those moments. I feel so grateful to have that experience as a teacher. Every teacher should experience something like that because we take so much for granted being a professional dancer.”

Paul and Meghan worked on “The Climb” for a year. They were invited to perform it one last time at the most prestigious ballroom dance competition in the nation: The Ohio Star Ball. In November, 2019, they performed the routine before a sold out Battelle Grand

Ballroom filled up to the balcony. In a room filled with the best of the best, they received a full standing ovation—one of only two standing ovations of the evening.

“We touched people,” recalled Paul. “A big strapping Marine came up to me and said, ‘Can I give you a hug?’ ‘Really? Well, if you need to,’ I said. He told me he's on active duty and he's fighting the bad guys for us. He told me, ‘You gave me hope that if something happened to me there's things that can be done to help me.’ And another girl I perceived as being emotionally disturbed gave me a hug. ‘Thank you for doing this.’” Paul's voice filled with emotion. “I was happy we made a connection. It was so much fun to touch people and have them acknowledge that what you did made a difference. I didn't cry after that one—I was at peace.”

For Meghan, it was different: “It was powerful. I've been going to that



*Meghan Anderson Afonkin and Dr. Paul Cederberg's dance "The Climb" was the Twin Cities Open Ballroom Championships Top Solo of 2019. Photo by Marc James Anderson of Creek 44.*

event (with her parents Scott and Amy Anderson) since I was three years old, watching past champions who are now adjudicators in their prime. To be invited to perform with Paul was a highlight of my dance career. This is what dancing is about. It is about inspiring and touching people's hearts through performance and movement, which is very rare for even top professionals to do. But Paul did it."

Along the way Paul nominated Meghan for a special award at the Galaxy Dance Festival called the "Second Chance at Life Award" for teachers who work with students with special needs.

Said Paul, "I nominated Meghan because she dedicated herself to working with me. I wanted to inspire people with physical and nonphysical disabilities. My tenant is that everyone has something to work on, to overcome, and I'm no different; mine is just more

tangible, more visible. I try to raise people up around me and this was a wonderful way to elevate this."

Added Meghan, "I was honored that I made an impact in Paul's life and could be part of his story. I do it because yes, I love dancing, but more so I've seen such a change in people's lives. . . in so many different ways. And my own life."

So what's next for Paul and Meghan? "We are pushing the limit on what I can do," began Paul. "I keep trying. We are doing a second solo now to The Impossible Dream. It is equally as difficult but not quite as emotional. It's hard after a year ago. That was the pinnacle."

Meghan continued, "With us performing The Climb, now people are aware, and they watch Paul in a completely different light and watch him do all styles. I don't think that will ever change. That will always be in the

minds of those watching us and (he will) continue to inspire."

All of this truly describes Paul, the man I've known for years. He is all about lifting people up with his positive outlook on life.

"I am not disabled," he says. "I was born with something wrong physically but functionally I'm not disabled. I'm not a victim. It's actually kind of a blessing, because I have to be so focused on what I do. I'm driven to overcome the physical and also the psychological parts too."

"I try to elevate everyone around me, whether it is my patients, my teachers, my spouse, relatives, whoever it is. It's something positive to do, and we all need something positive to have in our life."

Thank you, Paul for continuing The Climb. You are carrying all of us with you. **E**



*Dr. Paul Cederberg and Meghan Anderson Afonking finishing their performance of "The Climb" at Ohio Star Ball Friday Evening 2019 with a standing ovation for Paul. Photo by Marc James Anderson of Creek 44.*