

Frank and Angela Calabria share a laugh at their 50th Anniversary party when Angela's long gown interferes with an Argentine Tango step. Photo provided by Angela Calabria.



## “Dancing is What Keeps Me Alive!”

BY EMBER REICHGOTT JUNGE

I WAS MESMERIZED BY THE ELEGANCE and connectedness of the closely embraced couple performing Argentine Tango at the USA Dance Minnesota Chapter celebration at Mall of America (MOA) last October. The gray-haired petite woman, appearing lighter than 90 pounds, danced flawlessly, following every kick and every

timing change while maintaining picturesque posture.

She was dancing with her professional teacher from New York, whom she hadn't seen for over three years. That would be difficult for anyone, but not for Angela Calabria, even though she was dancing *at the age of 93*. I needed to meet this woman!

I visited with Angela at her assisted living residence in Minnetonka, where she and her teacher, David Salvatierra, had practiced for just one hour in the hallway before appearing at MOA.

“We practiced a few steps and I followed him,” said Angela. “I said to myself, this will be my last hoorah. I can still dance. People will hear I’m 93 and I have no crutches, no cane, and that is unusual at my age. And here you are, to hear more.”

Angela was right. At my young age of 68, I was inspired: not only by Angela, but by the support of her daughter Alissa Quinn from Albany, NY who arranged the MOA visit and performed a beautiful showcase of her own. When Alissa made plans to visit her mother and brother in Minnesota before Thanksgiving, Angela learned it was the same weekend as the MOA exhibition. She asked Alissa to perform for her there. To make it a special experience for her mom, Alissa called not only her own professional dance instructor, but her mother’s former Argentine Tango dance instructor, to invite them both to dance in Minnesota and provide one last meaningful mother–daughter dance experience. Both dance teachers responded enthusiastically and rearranged their schedules. The plan took coordination and expense, but everyone was up to the challenge.

“I was very happy it worked out in such a special way,” Angela said.

Angela’s dance story began approximately 67 years earlier, when her sister invited her to a dance studio party in Brooklyn. Her sister was dating a man who was taking lessons there. Angela resisted, but her sister would not hear of it. She knew Angela loved music and dancing; they danced as girls at birthday parties when they were growing up in Ecuador. “What are you waiting for, Angela, your prince to come?”

challenged her sister. Well, yes. And her prince showed up.

That's where 27-year-old Angela met her future husband, Frank Calabria. Frank was a ballroom dance escort at the studio for unaccompanied ladies, such as Angela. Angela had taken a few lessons at Arthur Murray Dance Studio and had no problem following him.

"After a while, Frank stopped dancing with all the other ladies he was supposed to, and I was happy," recalled Angela.

Every Sunday, Frank would pick up Angela to go dancing, have dinner, and see a show, while he was focused on writing a thesis to get his Doctorate degree in Psychology. The couple married the next year, in 1956. Shortly thereafter, Frank was hired as a Psychology professor for a college in Albany, New York, and the couple settled in nearby Schenectady, raising four children.

Angela and Frank danced ballroom together for over fifty years, learning all styles: Latin, Standard, American Rhythm and Smooth. It was years later that the couple began to learn Argentine Tango. They were inspired by an Argentine Tango performance they attended and they started taking private lessons. Angela loved Argentine Tango.

"I love the music. It is passionate, uplifting, and has the most beautiful music. It is very rich in instrumental tonalities; that just gets my body wanting to dance. The close embrace, that is another thing. I love the close embrace, because who doesn't like to be hugged! If you have a good partner, it's the greatest feeling. Argentine Tango rhythms can be slow, medium, or quick-paced, done three dances at a time called 'tandas,' which give me the chance to rest in-between."

Angela is a woman of spunk, willing to pursue her passion, including

breaking norms when her husband was unable to dance.

"If I didn't dance, I was not me. I craved it. I would do it, whether my husband wanted to or not," Angela began.

Her husband underwent a few medical procedures, including back and hip surgeries, that required months of recovery.

"Initially my husband was reluctant to have me dance with another partner," Angela said. "One day I told him as he was getting ready for a new procedure, 'I cannot be happy if I'm not dancing. And (just) because you are not able to dance, that shouldn't mean I can't dance on my own.' It took me the better part of a year to convince him."

Her husband was concerned that if she started dancing with a dance teacher, she would prefer dancing with him.

"I said 'just the opposite! If I can dance, I'll be happy and I'll be happy to continue dancing with you.' The more variety the better! You learn that way. I finally said, 'that's it.' I made an appointment with a dance teacher and that's that."

The couple danced at their 50th wedding anniversary celebration, though Frank's health was declining.

"We danced an Argentine Tango and Frank attempted to do a 'gancho,' a hook on my leg, but wasn't able to do so because of my long gown. I have a picture that is so precious, where we are both laughing out loud, during our anniversary dance."

Frank passed away in 2010. Two weeks after he passed, a dear friend who was head of the Albany Tango Society, called Angela.

"I know how much you love Argentine Tango dancing. Would it help if you come and take a lesson with me? A Tango instructor from Argentina

is coming, and I need a partner," he said.

Angela hesitated. "It had only been two weeks since my husband's passing. I was still in mourning and didn't feel like dancing. But then I remembered that Frank and I had talked about what would happen if one of us passed away. We promised each other that the other one had to continue dancing. So, I remembered that. I said, 'I will.'"

The local and Argentinian instructors came to her home for a lesson and that lesson drew her back to the dancing circle.

"Frank and I had a wonderful relationship. He would be happy that I'm still dancing, the way we promised each other," Angela said.

From then on, Angela focused her dance on Argentine Tango.

Angela would occasionally visit her son Mark in Minnesota, to spend time with his family, including four grandchildren. When she visited their family in June 2019, she felt a pain in her side as she was preparing to head home. Unexpectedly, she was rushed to the hospital for an acute hernia operation, and significant complications resulted in her ending up in a hospice residence, saying farewell to family and friends. Miraculously she recovered and was back on the dance floor by the end of the year.

Angela chose to stay in Minnesota, settling in Minnetonka. She discovered the Tango Society of Minnesota, including Founder Loisa Donnay. Since then, as the pandemic has allowed, Angela attends the Tuesday night Milongas at Loisa's studio in South Minneapolis, where she can dance with various partners. She also takes weekly lessons from Loisa in the hallway of her assisted living residence, where Loisa is leader and Angela follower. So why does Angela still take lessons at age 93?

“Dancing not only improves my dancing, but improves my posture,” replied Angela. “When you laugh, hear dance music, or do things you enjoy, there is something happening in the chemistry of your body that makes you feel better. I don’t feel lonely because I’m looking forward to Tuesday nights or my private dance lessons. Yes, I look forward to my family’s visits. But, on a daily basis, dancing is what keeps me alive. I’m not just breathing, but enjoying.”

And the Tango Society dancers enjoy Angela.

“She is a popular dancer, because she dances so many things so well,” said Loisa Donnay, her teacher who hosts the Tuesday night Milongas. “She can do anything a partner asks. She is very fun to dance with. She is the soul of politeness. She has the manners that we all wish everyone had. She’s elegant and dresses so nicely.”

How is Angela as a student?

“She’s sharp as a tack. She’s not as limber as she was in her earlier days, but she’s one of the best dancers I have,” said Loisa. “She catches everything. She’s very musical, she’s aware

of what’s going on, she’s playful, fun to dance with. It’s kind of an amazing thing that the partners just love to dance with her. Her dancing is very responsive to the lead. She can do just about anything. There is hardly anything I will hold back on. You saw that at MOA; her instructor did a lift with her. No problem! Just lifted her right up!”

While frequent dancing generally is known to prevent dementia, Loisa says that Argentine Tango is one of the best dances for brain health.

“It is a true ‘lead and follow’ dance,” she explained. “That means there aren’t as many patterns as in ballroom dance or a syllabus. It’s not a competition-based thing. Argentine Tango is a very impromptu, very improvised dance. People feel free to make things up, to create new things. There are so many different things a dancer can do. You have to change your mind all the time, and that’s good for you. Getting new input and making a new decision with that new input is what keeps your brain young.”

So, what is Angela’s advice for older seniors to get them to dance?

“If they are effusive about seeing somebody dance, I say, ‘Why not you? Why don’t you start? It’s never too late. You can do it. It’s never too late to learn something that is going to give you joy. It is the most complete exercise there is. It uses almost every part of your body, your arms and legs, and your mind. It enhances your posture and your mood.”

“Your passion can be anything. Mine happens to be Argentine Tango! I think more so because it is connected with music, other people and socializing. It is a sport that two people can do and both enjoy.”

Is dance the secret to Angela’s long life?

“Being happy is my secret to longevity. I have come to the realization that you make your own happiness with whatever your passion is,” concluded Angela.

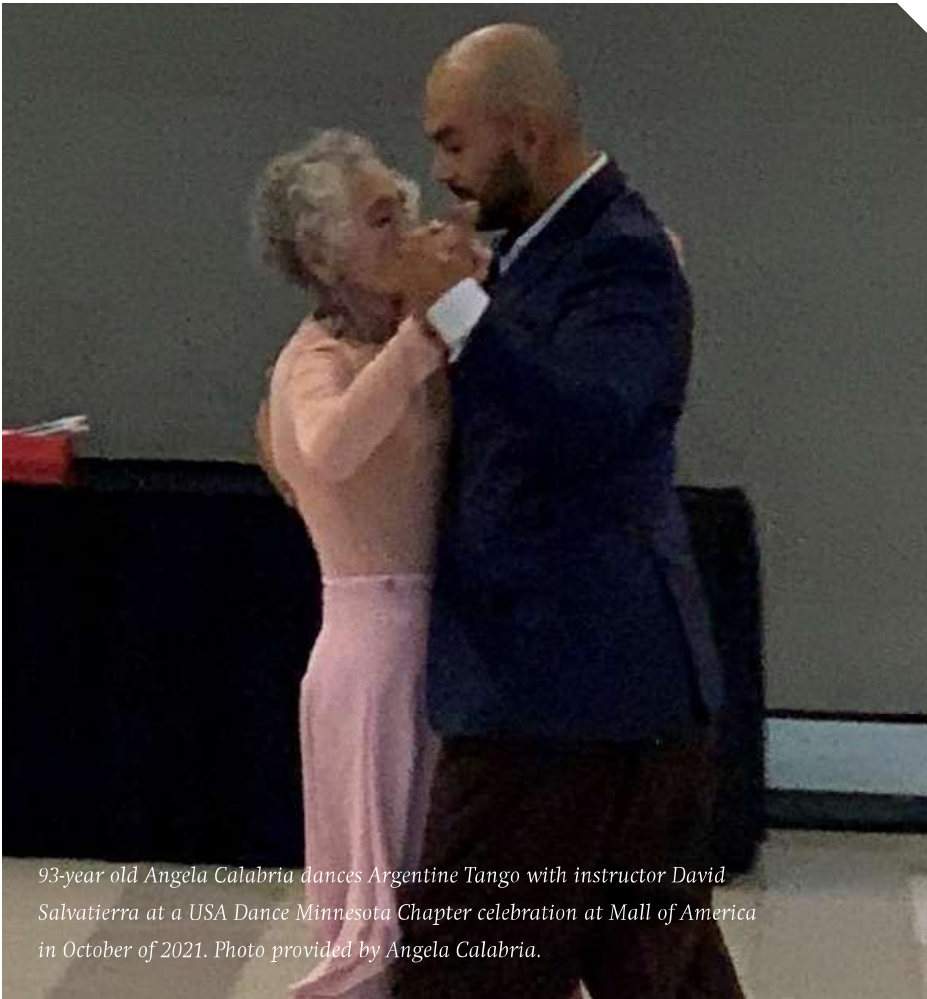
*Ember Reichgott Junge is an amateur ballroom dancer and retired co-founder of Heart of Dance. She invites inspiring stories from readers for her book-in-progress, “Stories of Resilience from the Ballroom Dancer’s Heart.” E*



Three generations of dancers (left to right): Rachel Quinn, Rachel’s mother, Alissa Quinn, and Alissa’s mother, Angela Calabria.



Angela Calabria dances Argentine Tango with instructor Loisa Donnay during her lesson in the hallway of her assisted living residence. Photos provided by Angela Calabria.



93-year old Angela Calabria dances Argentine Tango with instructor David Salvatierra at a USA Dance Minnesota Chapter celebration at Mall of America in October of 2021. Photo provided by Angela Calabria.

## The 20-Minute Dance Challenge An Exercise in Motivation and Appreciation

BY TEDDY HALVERSON

LET ME START OFF BY SAYING THAT I wouldn't consider myself a "dancer." I can dance (kind of) and I enjoy watching other people dance. I've never really focused on dancing up until this point in my life, but my partner used to dance when he was a child and has told me plenty of stories of how wonderful he felt after leaving dance class, so I decided to try out dancing a bit more and see how it made me feel. The only problem was, I didn't really know where to start. A couple of

months ago, I was browsing YouTube aimlessly when a video popped up on my recommended page; it was called "We Danced Every Day For A Month, Here's What Happened" by a channel called "WheezyWaiter." They seemed to enjoy themselves, so I figured I'd give it a go. And I'm glad I did.

The basic idea behind dancing every day is that it will make you feel good. Dancing is just another type of workout, so it releases endorphins making you feel better. In the video, they aimed

for 20 minutes of continuous dancing, but that seemed like a lot. But that's what makes it a challenge. I would just throw on some of my favorite music and jostle back and forth for a while, no real ballet or ballroom. During the first few days, I found myself laughing from the idea of what my neighbors thought: looking into the window and seeing this 38-year-old man jumping and twirling around in his living room. After about a week, however, I found it hard to motivate myself to get up and dance. I'd have a really tough day at work, and when I got home, I really just wanted to crawl into bed and sleep. When I willed myself to dance, however, I felt a lot better afterwards; I wasn't as tired or cranky anymore, and I felt energized to do a few things around the house before bed.

I'm coming to the end of this challenge, and I'd like to reflect on how it's been. Overall, I had fun. I'm sure I don't need to tell all of you the joys of dancing, but it was really fun to find an enjoyable way to exercise and let loose a bit. The regimen of a dance class or competition sounds intimidating, but being able to just kind of do what I want in my own home without feeling judged was kind of freeing. I got to just be me, unapologetically. At times, I was worried that I was wasting valuable time just dancing instead of doing other work, but that time I was dancing became valuable—it became me time.

I'll leave you all with a quote from author Hank Green that I think sums up my findings from the challenge: "You will always struggle with not feeling productive until you accept that your own joy can be something you produce." Happy dancing! **E**