

## Dr. Don DeBoer

### “Teaching Dance Is My Private Practice”

BY EMBER REICHGOTT JUNGE



*Dr. Don and Priscila dance Samba.  
Photo provided by Dr. Don DeBoer.*

**DR. DON DEBOER** CHOSE NOT TO set up his own practice as a licensed psychologist, but instead has been engaging students in talk therapy for the last 14 years at St. Paul’s Macalester College. When he leaves the campus health clinic at night, he teaches Salsa and Latin dance at a local studio.

“I feel like teaching dance is my private practice. I like it better. The dance I’m doing is therapy, no doubt about that; though it is not necessarily dance therapy. I’m not formally trained as a Dance Movement Therapist or an

Expressive Arts Therapist. But to me, it doesn’t matter, as long as you are getting therapeutic value out of it. There is this undeniable connection between psychotherapy and the arts. My training as a dancer and as a psychologist were always two different things, but they always happened concurrently for me.”

Don can relate to the trials of the college students he counsels. In high school, he wasn’t confident, and he didn’t feel “smart enough.” He wasn’t an achiever. “I was probably depressed

off and on, and a little lonely,” he recalled. Music was his lifeline. His mother encouraged him to go to college. Today he might say he suffered from “imposter syndrome,” the latest term to describe the phenomenon he sees in some students who go into higher education, and who think they must have fooled people, because their confidence level doesn’t match the context they are in. They ask themselves, “How did I pull this off? I must be an imposter.”

Don now encourages his students with his own experience. “It’s not about whether you’re talented or not. Or whether you’re smart or not. For me, it boiled down to this: do you want to put the work into it? And if you are absolutely passionate about it, then you’ll get to where you’re going and you are finally there.”

He feels the same way about dance. “With the right attitude and encouragement and patience, people will get there. And quite frankly, when you love art, you just have to do it. I like people to think of these things as more attainable than they realize.”

Don’s interest in dance came from his love of music and his multi-ethnicity. Music was always what connected him to people and made him happy. He thought he could be a DJ, so he started in community college in radio and television communications. He took speech courses to overcome his shyness. He gained confidence as he excelled in communications, and realized he always wanted to be a psychologist, though he hadn’t thought he was smart enough. At the same time, he volunteered as a DJ at a local radio station and loved hearing the Latin rhythms. It bothered him that he was part Puerto Rican and didn’t know how to dance to Latin music.

The fact that dance was tied to his cultural identity made it more

important to him to invest in it. Though his father of Dutch descent gave him his last name, his mother is of Puerto Rican and Hawaiian descent. His grandmother grew up in an era when she was embarrassed to be Hawaiian, and she couldn't speak Hawaiian lest she be considered "less than." She became a Hawaiian activist who started the Office of Hawaiian Affairs. "That's why those cultural elements are important to me and why I didn't want to assimilate completely," recalled Don. "I think when you come from a people that's been marginalized and colonized, whatever you have left, you know how precious it is. You preserve it. So my grandmother was always instilling that in me and telling me that my Puerto Rican and Hawaiian side was special. She told me I should be proud."

When Don moved to the Twin Cities in 1993 to pursue his Ph.D, he missed his Puerto Rican and Hawaiian family members, so he immediately sought out the Latino community. It gave him a sense of identity, comfort and family. "When you are an American citizen and you are multi-ethnic, you have a more complex understanding of cultural identity. There is the irony that you are exploring a culture that you are already supposed to be in. There is a dissonance between fitting in and not fitting in. At the same time, people assume you want to blend in completely to the white culture, so why bother to make a fuss over the other parts of your cultural identity?"

Music and ethnicity led Don to his eventual "home" in the Latino dance community in the Twin Cities. Depressed at the breakup of a relationship, Don decided to take a Salsa dance class with a friend in a similar situation. "I think we quit after the first day. I couldn't keep up, it seemed like everybody was ahead of me." (Kind of like those old high school days?) So he

got a VHS tape on "How to Dance Salsa." He had music from his radio days, he had a partner, and he loved breaking things down. The pair learned on their own, went back to the class, and were better than everyone else. "Again, it's my philosophy," said Don. "It's just the work. Study it. A lot of people thought that was funny. Counting, counting! Taking notes. How else am I supposed to learn this stuff?"

Don never went through the ballroom crowd. Everything he did was through the Latin dance nightclub culture. Around 1995-96, he started lessons with Rebecca Abas of Four Seasons Dance Studio in Minneapolis. "She was the only one at the time teaching Salsa the way that Latinos were actually doing it. I became addicted." At one point he danced about 12 hours per week in lessons, group classes, video practice, and nightclubs. "I became a fanatic and I lost about 30 pounds. For the first time, I was aware of my body in ways I wasn't aware before. I was cultivating my look, I was meeting people.

It was a natural anti-depressant. I was connecting to culture, connecting to music, connecting to people. What a high that was! And coming from a psychologist's standpoint, this to me was like medicine. Why have people talk to me about their problems while getting prescribed anti-depressants, when they could be going out and exercising, enjoying culture, and meeting people? To me, this was a gift waiting for me. It just felt right. There were things I could do with my body that no one ever taught me. It just came out. I would wonder, is that in my DNA?"

Eventually Rebecca invited him to teach at Four Seasons. He has since taught Salsa classes on Friday nights for the past 20 years, stopping only when the pandemic hit. "I like analyzing dance, because I want to know what the rules are. For me, that's the joy of teaching because I'm looking at movement and I'm deriving rules and order out of this beautiful visual phenomenon. We add numbers to that. And this pause. This beat's longer than



*Dr. Don and Diana and Bachata.*

*Photo provided by Dr. Don DeBoer.*

that. I love that part of it. That might be different than somebody who likes movement in an abstract, free form way.”

Along the way, Don also taught classes in various nightclubs, including a gay nightclub in downtown Minneapolis called the Saloon. “We were going to do a Latin night, and I was excited because the gay Latinos couldn’t go anywhere to dance without people gawking at us. I was warned by the club manager that it might not fly. Well, they underestimated, because the first night we had Salsa at the Saloon, tons of gay and lesbian Latinos were there.” So Don taught a GLBT Salsa class for years. “In the past you had to have a gay night. That changed. The fact that you don’t need a night anymore says a lot about our progress. A gay couple could go to any nightclub and dance together and wouldn’t be treated terribly or gawked at. Hopefully gays and lesbians have become mainstream enough that you don’t need a separate dance night to have fun. However,

because of that, that subculture kind of faded into mainstream. That special place is not quite there anymore.”

Both of Don’s careers, psychotherapy and dance, are therapeutic in different ways. “I love talk therapy because I do consider myself verbal and intellectual. And the students are that way as well; they are learners. But dance was therapeutic in a way I didn’t appreciate with talk therapy. When you are in talk therapy you are talking about things. When you are dancing you are just in it; there’s something submersive about it, it’s very present. It feels like a rush of positive energy throughout your body. Pretty powerful, almost like an addiction, but a positive addiction. It feels more wholistic, maybe. When I’m in talk therapy I’m this talking head. But when I’m dancing my whole body is in there, and there is touch involved and that’s also powerful.”

As we wait for the pandemic to resolve, Don is staying grounded by imagining the “rebirth” of the scene. Slowly, people are risking taking

private lessons. “They tell me it helps,” said Don. “You can see in their faces they are just elated. So thankful. It’s like the pandemic took away all of our toys, ‘and I’m not giving them back until you really appreciate them.’ Start thinking about gratitude. Start thinking about hope.”

He looks forward to again teaching dance to Macalester students for Phy Ed credit. “The nice thing about teaching college students is that I can challenge them more. For noncollege adults, it is more of a pastime. Macalester students are already primed to study. They will work a little harder. That’s rewarding.” But the pandemic has been difficult generally for students. “A year later, we are finding Zoom fatigue. They are in one environment all the time, so they are starved, trapped at home, or trapped on campus. Previously some students felt isolated; now they are isolated. They’ve hit a wall. Their social support systems are shortened. There has been an increase in counseling requests. I hope to do some Latin line dances outside soon.”

For Don, dance has never been a competitive thing. What he loves most about dancing in the Latin culture is that “it belongs to everybody. It’s supposed to be a community thing.”

As the pandemic resolves and vaccinations increase, dance community will return. Gratitude and hope may well secure the foundation for that community for years to come. Wouldn’t that be the best therapy of all...for all of us?

Ember Reichgott Junge is an amateur ballroom dancer and retired Cofounder of Heart of Dance. She is writing a book entitled “Stories of Resilience from the Ballroom Dancer’s Heart.” She welcomes ideas for inspiring stories at [ember.reichgott@gmail.com](mailto:ember.reichgott@gmail.com). **E**



*Dr. Don and leads Angela in a dip.  
Photo provided by Dr. Don DeBoer.*