



DANCING BLIND: THE ANNIE PARK STORY

There is no Braille, for dance steps.

"There is no better way to thank God for your sight than by giving a helping hand to someone in the dark."
 — Helen Keller



By David Wood, Reporter/Photojournalist, WHNT News (Huntsville, AL) & Bob Pratico, Instructor/USA Dance member

Ask any ballroom dance instructor you can find about the prospect of teaching a novice to proficiently Paso Doble, Quickstep or Tango. They'll tell you without hesitation, that it's certainly going to take plenty of practice and willingness to work hard.

Tell the instructor their fledgling student has been blind since birth, and they're likely to look at you as if you've shuffled one too many rounds of continuous cha-cha in an all night, dance-until-you-drop Latin rhythm competition.

Think of the world's famous dancers, classic or contemporary. They all have many attributes in common. Those among us who share a mastery of fanciful footwork also share poise, dedication, agility and vision — and I don't mean creative foresight or artistic intuition. By vision, I mean the ability to actually see.

How, after all, could one expect to study, observe, absorb then replicate specific dance maneuvers without the benefit of sight? There is no Braille for dance steps. Professionals might not go so far as to say the thought of instructing a blind dancer would be 'impossible', but they would likely at least admit the effort and the outcome, while admirable, may not be pretty.

Enter Annie Park of Huntsville, AL to prove them all wrong. In addition to falling shy of the typical demographic interested in ballroom dance, the 19-year-old has also been blind since birth. Annie has always loved music and dance, but in July of last year her dream of sailing across a dance floor started to become a reality.

When they heard about Annie's desire to dance, Bob and Debbie Pratico (USA Dance North Alabama Chapter 6114) offered to give Annie lessons free of charge, and Southern Elegance Dance Studio owner Rick Jones graciously agreed to forego the floor fee. Atlanta Professional dancer Jari Muller also freely dedicated some of his time to help instruct the teen when he visited Huntsville. Bob also corresponded with Professional Instructor/Judge Larinda McRaven of Boston, who had taught a blind person to dance several years ago...who told me this is probably going to be one of the most challenging things I will ever do, but probably one of the most rewarding things I will do — and she was right," Bob said.

"I was amazed at how fast Annie could learn. A photographic memory, but extremely challenging to communicate with," Bob admitted. "You just can't say, 'look in the mirror, do this,' someone who's never seen, has no concept of what a hand looks like. And so very quickly on we realized the best way to teach her was my wife would make the shape that we need her to make and she'd feel my wife all over and immediately understand and make the shape." He said it didn't take long after starting lessons to realize Annie's potential...and said Annie completely and fearlessly trusts whoever is leading her on the dance floor. In just one month, Annie learned basic social waltz, tango, foxtrot, swing, rumba and even simple quickstep.

Annie, blind since birth, was adopted out of a Russian orphanage in 1999 at the age of four by Terry and Syble Park of Huntsville, who were working in Russia as Christian missionaries.

"Annie has gorgeous posture, unusual for a blind person, the result of her mother making her practice walking with a book on her head for several years as a child."



In the fall of 2014, Annie performed a Showcase waltz in her first public exhibition after only three months of instruction, astounding everyone in the audience. One month later she performed in a second Showcase exhibition with dozens of other couples (all far more experienced); her performance received a standing ovation. Two months later, she danced yet a third Showcase exhibition.

What's ahead for Annie in 2015? Annie, now a senior (and valedictorian of her class) at the Alabama School for the Blind in Talladega, AL, makes hometown pilgrimages to Huntsville each weekend to continue instruction. She will be attending the University of North Alabama in the Fall and plans to continue her dancing from there. In January, she competed in Nashville in the ProAm division with Jari Muller in Bronze Standard, again amazing both judges and audience...and she will be competing with Bob in the new Teacher/Student division at the USA Dance Gumbo DanceSport Championships in June in Bronze/Silver Standard and Smooth and perhaps the Carolina Fall Classic in October. ☺



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