

What Has Dance Got to Do with It? Dancing with Dementia in Durham

By Amy C. Spaulding

“Close your eyes and feel the music.”

Norman Pendergraft's words are filled with both wisdom and grace. His 91-year-old frame moves effortlessly across the makeshift ballroom on the indoor pickleball court at Croasdaile Village, a senior living community in Durham, North Carolina. I, on the other hand, am struggling to keep up, stepping on his feet one too many times. His patience is unwavering, his movements fluid, his joy palpable. He isn't just a dance instructor—he's a guide, a mentor, and, unknowingly, the catalyst for a personal transformation I never saw coming.

The Life of a Renaissance Man

Born in 1934, Norman Pendergraft's journey is a testament to a life devoted to the arts and education. After serving in the U.S. Navy from 1954 to 1958, he pursued his passion for the arts, earning degrees from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His aspirations took him to Italy, where he trained as an opera singer before fate redirected him to North Carolina Central University (NCCU). As an art historian and curator, Pendergraft spent decades championing African American art, bringing visibility to renowned artists such as Jim Moon, Geoffrey Holder, and Robert S. Duncanson. His impact was recognized with the Ella Fountain Pratt Award for Lifetime Achievement in the Arts and the Outstanding Achievement Award from the North Carolina Museums Council.

But here he is, decades later, on a Wednesday night, not in an art gallery or concert hall, but leading a social dance class at Croasdaile Village.

The Dance of Community and Connection

Every Wednesday at seven, Norman and his friend Mel Davis volunteer to teach ballroom dance to the residents. Some are retired professors, authors, librarians, and captains of industry. Many have lost spouses. Others are adjusting to life with physical limitations or cognitive decline. But when the music starts, all labels dissolve, and they are simply dancers.

I found myself in this unexpected place not out of interest in ballroom dancing, but out of duty. My mother, recently diagnosed with early-onset dementia, needed company while my father played bridge. I agreed reluctantly, feeling trapped by familial obligation. I expected boredom. I expected awkwardness. Instead, I found joy.

Memory in Motion

Dancing with my mother and Norman became an unexpected gift. My resistance melted as I stepped onto the dance floor, guided by the steady hands of a man who had spent a lifetime mastering movement. “Feel the music,” Norman reminded me, and for the first time in a long time, I did. My mother, once a jitterbug champion in her youth, beamed as she twirled in the

arms of these silver-haired gentlemen. In those moments, she wasn't a woman struggling with memory loss. She was simply a dancer, moving effortlessly with the music, completely present.

Studies have shown that dance can be a powerful intervention for cognitive decline. A systematic review published in *BMC Geriatrics* in 2023 found that dance therapy significantly improves global cognition, memory, executive function, attention, and language in older adults. Neurologist and former professional dancer Dr. Baibing Chen emphasizes that dance enhances neuroplasticity, engages multiple brain regions, and reduces stress through endorphin release (*New York Post*, 2023). For individuals with dementia, dance isn't just recreation; it is a form of memory care.

The Lessons Beyond the Steps

That night, I saw my mother differently. Our dance, metaphorical and literal, was shifting. I had been resisting my role in my parents' aging journey, fearing it would consume me. But I realized that my father, overwhelmed by the weight of caregiving, was sitting this dance out, and that was okay. He needed rest, just as much as I needed to move.

Norman and Mel have adapted their dances for their aging partners. Songs last six minutes, allowing dancers to rest in between. Norman, despite his agility, avoids the merengue—by his own admission, too up-tempo for his heart. There is wisdom in this balance, in knowing when to move and when to pause.

The Dance Continues

What I had dreaded—spending time with my mother in what I assumed would be a somber space—became a highlight of my week. The moment I had resisted turned into something beautiful, even enchanting. There is something about surrendering to the rhythm of life and allowing space for serendipity.

I don't know what the future holds for my mother, but I do know this: she remembers the steps to the jitterbug and still knows how to have fun. And for now, that is enough.

As I return to Croasdaile Village next week, I will slip on my dancing shoes, take Norman's hand, and glide across the floor. Because sometimes, the best way to hold onto memory is to live life fully in the present moment.