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Time to take a (dance) step outside your comfort zone

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It's over!

I'm talking about my ballroom dancing career.

It ended Saturday night in front of hundreds of people at a gala dinner at the Fairmont Winnipeg.

My dancing career lasted three minutes. For 180 seconds, I was a dancing fool.

I'm going to tell you all about it, but first I need to talk about the journey I took to get to the dance floor.

That lasted a little longer. Four months, to be exact.

It began when Andrew Terhoch, special events manager for the Society for Manitobans with Disabilities/Easter Seals, invited me to take part in *Dancing with Celebrities* in which local personalities are teamed up with actual dancers in a ballroom competition.

The idea was that us awkward "celebrities," by stepping onto a dance floor, would highlight the fact people with disabilities are forced to step out of their comfort zones every day of their lives.

I agreed to give it a shot partly because SMD is a great cause, but mostly because my wife said she'd make me do my own laundry for the rest of my life if I didn't get off the couch and learn how to dance.

When I went to the Ted Motyka Dance Studio for my first lesson, I was paired with a Russian-born dancer named Anna Rudman. I was mildly terrified of Anna because (a) she's incredibly beautiful; (b) she's incredibly young (17); and (c) she's the most amazing dancer you've ever seen, whereas I am a middle-aged newspaper columnist with the rhythm of a sandbag.

Twice a week for the past four months, Anna patiently taught me the sultry moves of the rumba, the "international dance of love." I was not a gifted student. But it didn't matter.

In the end, Anna taught me a lot more than how to waggle my hips like a tub of Jell-O. She taught me how to step out of my comfort zone. She taught me how to have fun and how to dance like no one was watching.

It was the same story for all the celebrity dancers -- Fred Penner, Sierra Noble, "Dancing Gabe" Langlois, Indu Brar and Justin Swandel. Our partners became our friends.

As I staggered like Frankenstein through my first lessons, I asked Margaret Motyka, co-owner of the dance studio, whether she truly believed anyone can learn to dance. "Anyone can dance," she told me. "If you can walk, you can dance."

And it's true. In fact, even if you can't walk, you can dance. If you'd been there Saturday to see SMD's All Abilities Dance Group, many of whom are in wheelchairs, you'd know how true that is.

Even hardened newspaper columnists became misty-eyed watching this inspiring troupe, led by CBC Radio's Marcy Markusa and Ismaila Alfa, strut their stuff, faces shining with sheer joy.

Which brings us back to Anna and me. There we were Saturday, Anna looking like a princess in her shimmering silver dress, and me sweating like the world's largest baked potato in a silver satin tuxedo shirt.

I'm used to being bad in events like this, but this time was going to be different. I wanted Anna and my wife and my kids and my friends to be proud of me. Most of all, I didn't want to drop Anna on her head during our dramatic dips.

When the music started, Anna began to whirl and sway, then, with a sultry flick of her hand, signalled for me to do the rumba walk -- "Quick, quick, sloooooow, keep your legs together like a boy model" -- towards her.

I don't remember a lot after that. There was undulating and emoting and smouldering, along with some dangerous dips. Then, to generous applause, it was over. I slipped once because -- seriously -- dancing shoes do not have a lot of traction.

I do remember giving Anna a bear hug and asking over and over: "Did I forget anything? Did I do that second dip?" She beamed and said it was all good.

The judges were gentle, too. My buddy Tom Milroy from BOB FM was happy I'd survived.

Former MP and likely mayoral candidate Judy Wasylycia-Leis teased: "Doug you weren't nearly as klutzy as you've said. In fact, you were kind of hot!"

Finally, Andrew Lewis, artistic director of the Royal Winnipeg Ballet, declared: "In my business, Doug, we say less is more. You proved that tonight."

So "Dancing Gabe" was the big winner, and the curtain has dropped on my ballroom career. I thought I'd be relieved, but I'm a bit sad. I'm really going to miss dancing with Anna.

I'll never be graceful. I'll never be seductive. But on Saturday night, for three wonderful minutes, for 180 unforgettable seconds, I danced like no one was watching.

You should give it a try some time.

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