

Living to *Dance*, *Dancing to Live* by Jim Batts



*Above: Linda Stuart before her Aerobic Boogie class
Right: Linda has always wanted to dance.*

Linda Stuart was 3 years old when she first rose tippy-toe in a ballet class and peeked into her future. Dancing “came very naturally to me,” Linda recalled, and dance became her passion.

Classes take money, though, and by the time she had moved into her teen years there was none for dance. She pursued her dream anyway, dancing at home and taking an occasional free class.

Losing professional instruction was a defining event in another way. It triggered Linda’s lifelong struggle with weight control.

After marriage, and a divorce at 27, another passion emerged — entrepreneurship. It fueled her drive to create a management consulting and executive search firm.

“I achieved the success I wanted,” Linda said, “but I was so busy trying to be successful I didn’t take time for myself, such as dancing, exercising, weight training and proper nutrition. Without dancing, I had put on weight.”

Her business success fulfilled one dream, but it wasn’t enough. “I still had the persistent feeling that something was missing in my life,” she said.

Linda enjoyed occasional classes in jazz, ballet, tap, freestyle, Jazzercise and modern dance. When she was 48, she made up her mind to teach low-impact aerobics. She soon was also carrying her boom box and CDs to lead hour-long hip-hop sessions at a group home for girls ages 8 to 17 in Scottsdale, Arizona.

“I was a very overweight but very excited instructor. The girls were delighted and my visits increased to three times a week,” she said.

Linda kept her consulting business while pursuing a part-time career as a dance instructor. “Little did I know that this would be the key to setting my passion free, unlocking so much of the pain, and literally removing the excess weight layer by layer,” she said.

Next, she began to teach low-impact aerobics four times a week to people ages 40 to 80 at the Via Linda Senior Center in Scottsdale, Arizona.

Linda's body was adjusting to the rigors of teaching dance so often, but some things she was feeling began to worry her. "At 50 years old," she recalled, "everything seemed to be hurting me. I sprained my right shoulder and pulled my lower back, but I had the nagging feeling that something more was troubling me."

Linda visited her doctor on a Friday and itemized her aches, pains and symptoms — all on the right side of her body. "Without even examining me, he diagnosed my condition as stress-related, advised me to go home, take a Valium, make an appointment to visit a psychiatrist and come back to see him in a week," she said.

She taught her aerobics class the following Monday, but something still wasn't right. "After surviving a surreal hour, I arrived at my doctor's office with a friend in tow, demanding he actually give me an examination with my friend as my witness."

By this time, Linda's speech was slurred, her right arm shook uncontrollably and her right leg "felt like it weighed a minimum of 1,000 pounds."

A CT scan confirmed a stroke in the basal ganglia area of her brain, which is involved with bodily movement. Damage to the basal ganglia can cause Parkinson's-type movements or even the flailing of an arm or leg. The stroke affected her entire right side.

Linda's first thought was, "A stroke? This has to be happening to someone else, certainly not me.

"I became hysterical," she said. "This was a nightmare. I had no family, no one to care for me and my kittens, a business to attend to and aerobics classes to teach." She did have a circle of close friends, and they rallied to her support.

Testing over the next three days further defined the impact of the stroke and lay the basis for her recuperation.

Back home, Linda wrestled with the "why me?" question. "My two closest friends came to be with me.



"The therapists kept telling me it would become easier but the exercises were all so difficult — yet in some way not challenging enough."

I thought I was dying and wondered if it might be the last time we would be together."

That's when she began to fight back.

Her neurologist started her on eight weeks of grueling physical, occupational and speech therapy. She struggled with routines like picking up pins with tweezers and inserting them into a pattern on a tic-tac-toe board, and dealing with the humiliating inability to place one foot in front of the other without falling.

"The therapists kept telling me it would become easier," she recalled, "but the exercises were all so difficult — yet in some way not challenging enough. I became convinced that dancing was my only hope to be healthy and functional again."

Linda had good reason to be confident. In the three years leading up to her stroke, she had lost over 50 pounds while dancing and instructing. So, after several more months of rehabilitation, she began to practice dancing at home. And she started a new business.

"I obtained the national trademark for Aerobic Boogie™, a name I came up with that describes the style of dancing I do," Linda said. "I was excited. I had a dream, and started instructing classes around Scottsdale, starting in September 2003. I reduced my weight by another 30 pounds. Aerobic Boogie is the new me."

The new Linda teaches dance for women ages 35 to 65 in the city of Scottsdale Leisure Recreation program and continues with the senior center classes.

"No one can believe I had a stroke, but I know," Linda said. "My right side is slower than the left. I have to really focus to make the right leg and right arm move with the left side." Her words sometimes won't come out, "usually when I have to be most articulate. My hormones went crazy after the stroke, but dancing helps subdue some of the symptoms. And I get really fatigued."

The stroke was life-altering for Linda, but as she reflects on the experience she sees it as "a stroke of good luck." **SC**