

Catherine, the doyenne of folk dancing in Omaha, Nebraska is flying west to grace Fall Camp with competent instruction and down to earth humor. Zoomers met Catherine on screen in 2020 and her followers now extend across the Atlantic and Pacific. She is a featured teacher/ leader several evenings a week: Chicago's Virtual Dance Room on Fridays, Dancing with Friends on Mondays, Zoom Friends International on Tuesday and Columbus Folk on Wednesdays. Catherine's Sunday afternoon Omaha dance group is hybrid. She also is a guest leader for the Global Folk Dance Party and still finds time to help organize/ attend/ teach at annual dance events such as the Pink Party, Folk Ball in Madison, June Camp in Chicago, Play Shop in North Carolina and Fall Camp in Simi Valley! Teaching in California will be a homecoming— Catherine began dancing in La Jolla as a 7th grader when her

mathematician parents were at UC San Diego for a sabbatical year. She was invited by a friend to attend the folkdance club at the junior high in San Diego and recalls dancing Hora Mamtera and Road to the Isles, taught by the physical education teacher. Back home in Madison Catherine asked



her parents to drive her to folk dance groups at the University of Wisconsin. By high school she was an expert! Catherine continued folk dancing in college. In 1973-74 during her junior year abroad at Université Aix-Marseille, she performed with a Balkan Dance Ensemble and took classes in Bulgarian and Serbo-Croatian languages.



Professionally Catherine is a linguist, specifically a syntactician, and her main focus of study is the formal properties of sentence structure. An article she published in 1988 continues to be cited in present-day research. It deals with the word order of questions like “Who, What.” Catherine discerned patterns that correlate with other characteristics of a language as she compared and analyzed Serbian, Polish, Bulgarian and Romanian languages. Linguists continue to investigate whether her conclusions are true for additional languages. (Ethnologue suggests that approximately 7,117 languages are spoken in the world today, so Catherine will continue to enjoy her status as a “rock star” linguist for multiple years.) What does this mean for Fall Camp? She will enunciate and spell dance names correctly. Who benefits? Everyone who creates playlists and wonders how to spell “Račenica.”

Catherine is fluent in several Slavic and Romance languages. After moving to Nebraska to assume a faculty position at Wayne State University she became intrigued by an endangered Siouan Language, Omaha-Ponca, and received a grant



to do fieldwork among the few native speakers living nearby on a reservation. Her first foray at “field work” took place when she was ten years old on a family trip to Europe. Catherine recounts: “...my sister and I were left for several weeks on a farm in France while our parents went off to a mathematics meeting in Russia with the French couple who owned the farm... Three French children, their grandmother, an au pair from England, and my sister and I got along quite well and I learned a fair amount of (pidgin) French, which no doubt did feed into my eventual interest in languages.”

Catherine’s foreign travel is more related to linguistics than folklore. She recalls spending time every summer in Bulgaria or Yugoslavia throughout the 1970’s. In 1972 she attended a month - long Bulgarian language institute for foreigners in Sofia,

followed by solo travel around the country. (Brave for a teenager to travel behind the iron curtain alone, but Catherine had a unique insurance policy. Her mother, a renowned mathematician in the field of topology, advised that she could go to the math department of any university if she experienced problems and say that she was a “Rudin.” Help would be forthcoming!) A friend from the US joined her in 1973 for impromptu travel by train through Bulgaria. Plans



included sleeping at hostels, hanging out and sightseeing. When they exited the train at Deveti Septemvri station one evening with plans to find accommodation nearby, they discovered the station exclusively served a military base. Arriving at the entrance they were led to separate rooms and interrogated. Satisfied that the pretty travelers

posed no threat, the officers assigned them a room and invited the young women to dinner. The soldiers were thrilled to spend an evening with unexpected female guests! Catherine admits the feeling was mutual. Later in her career Catherine was in Macedonia for a linguistics meeting. Strolling with colleagues and, deep in conversation, she inadvertently stepped into a construction hole, an 8' deep hole! Her friends managed to extricate her but one arm was nearly useless until she returned to the US for surgery to staple torn supraspinatus and infraspinatus tendons back onto her humerus.

Marriage added unique opportunities to experience life outside the US. Catherine met her husband Ali when both were graduate students at Indiana University. He was born in Avramovo, a small village in the Rhodope Mountains of Southern Bulgaria that had been settled by Turkish people since the 12th century. By the time of Catherine's visits, his family had re-located to a village in the plains near Burgas. She often stayed a month at a time and recalls: "Life was fairly primitive—almost everything done by hand, no indoor plumbing nor running water." They cultivated much of their food. Catherine observed: "Society was rapidly changing from a very traditional Muslim way of life to a modern communist (and later capitalist) one—dress and behavior of women especially!" During Covid closure Catherine presented a zoomed culture session that included slides of summers living with her children in a tiny cottage in Bulgaria. She

even made winter visits to the village while she was residing in Sofia to do research at the Academy of Sciences, and mentioned that housing the animals under the same roof as the family warmed the house. Her mother-in-law laughed at Catherine's fear of the big cow, which had to be pushed aside if one wanted to visit the outhouse on a cold night.



Ali's extended family includes relatives in Turkey. Catherine went to visit in 1976 and suffered multiple misfortunes. She recalls getting bitten by a horse in the middle of Istanbul which necessitated rabies shots. She and Ali stayed with conservative relatives in Bursa who kept her indoors. Once she and Ali snuck out for a walk through the neighborhood. He encountered old friends. They stepped into a taverna for conversation and refreshment. Females not being permitted in the taverna, Catherine waited outside. Neighbors happened by, were shocked to find her unaccompanied in public, and escorted her back home. Finally, Ali and Catherine set out to travel through Turkey on their own. She got dysentery and nearly died. Ask Catherine to share more travel stories at Fall Camp after she presents a Culture Corner talk.

Catherine not only teaches and leads dances from multiple genres of world dance, she sings, plays the violin, cooks and gardens. Currently she plays with the Mariachi Negro i Oro and with a chamber orchestra at Wayne State College. She harmonizes with a shape note singing group in Omaha. (Shape note singing is polyphonic, with four part harmonies and sometime shocking lyrics.) Catherine enjoys a large mug of strong coffee, reading fiction, listening to the musical group Lankum, nibbling Locum with pistachios, eating a piece of tart rhubarb pie for dessert and tending her garden in Wayne, Nebraska. She boasts of making a "mean Banica" and Tarator (dilled cucumber soup) in the summer. Catherine and Ali have two sons, both active professionals who now live in California. She is excited to visit Korea in 2026 where a linguistics conference will take place.

Catherine received numerous accolades when she retired from teaching at Wayne State University. Linguistics continues to be her passion, but retirement has offered more time to devote to hobbies and folk dancing. We are fortunate that she could fit Fall Camp here in Simi Valley into her schedule. Catherine stated that her love for Bulgarian syntax was a follow-up to her passion for Bulgarian folk dancing during an interview at the First Conference of Balkan and South Slavic languages in Plovdiv. The interviewer, Iliyana Krapova, described Catherine as gentle and earnest, "...a person of peace in heart and mind." "...a source of inspiration for many." Now that you've been introduced to Catherine register for Fall Camp, attend, dance with her and be inspired!

*Diane Baker*

