

NORTH VALPO

NEIGHBORS

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North Valpo's Smith Family

FLORA, FAUNA AND FOXTROTS

PHOTO BY ANGIE JANUCHOWSKI, ASPEN STUDIOS

■ BY CHERYL WOOTEN-WILCOX

As professional ballroom dancers, Mark and Lauren Smith's grace and precision are undeniable, but their talents and passions don't stop there. When they're not gliding across the dance floor, you'll likely find them playing in the yard with their two young sons, trekking through forests in search of elusive deer, boating and fishing on Lake Michigan, or foraging for wild mushrooms. This delightful couple proves that life is more than just one passion—it's an adventure filled with rhythm, nature, and discovery.

Lauren grew up in Crown Point and graduated from Crown Point High School. She then attended St. Ambrose University in Davenport, Iowa where she earned a degree in elementary education with an endorsement in mathematics. For ten years, she enjoyed a successful teaching career where, in addition to teaching at MacArthur Elementary in Cedar Lake, she was a math coach for other teachers. Lauren also coached Math Bowl, middle school golf and Girls on the Run. "It's a running program that incorporates social and emotional learning, goal setting, confidence building and anti-bullying," says Lauren.

Mark grew up in Indianapolis and after graduating from Southport High School began working as a carpenter. To earn additional money, he also worked the midnight shift at a local gas station. Several years before he met Lauren, Mark was dating a girl who worked at a dance studio. Mesmerized by his then



FROM DANCING SHOES TO HUNTING BOOTS.



ZACHARIAH AND ELIJAH.

girlfriend and the other pros who were dancing, Mark decided then and there that he was going to become a professional dancer. "I picked it up pretty quick and began teaching in the evening," he shares. "I was all in." Mark quickly advanced through the various levels and soon earned the title of certified gold professional.

In 2009, Mark became the owner of an independent dance studio. However, his search for a better model led him to eventually purchase a Fred Astaire franchise in Indianapolis. The studio grew to nine fulltime staff pros and was consistently one of the top 25 studios in the world. But his vision was greater. "I always wanted to bring others into the industry and raise the next generation of professional ballroom dancers," he explains. So, when two studios came up for sale in Schererville and Valparaiso, he purchased them and split his time living between Indianapolis and Northwest Indiana.

Although busy as an elementary school teacher, Lauren wanted to learn to ballroom dance and seven years ago began taking lessons at Mark's Valpo studio. "He started teaching me and we



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hit it off famously well," she says with a smile. Soon, they began dancing and competing together but not dating. Since she was in the studio practically every day, Mark suggested that Lauren start teaching there, which she did. "And then it happened," shares Lauren. "The more time we spent together, we just couldn't hide the fact that we were in love."

Like an intricate tango, Mark's proposal to Lauren was meticulously choreographed. He booked a room at The Conrad Indianapolis so that he and Lauren could celebrate her birthday and also attend a New Year's gala. After leaving the room to go birthday shopping, the Conrad staff swooped in and decorated their room with banners containing photos of all the places they'd been and the fun things they'd done. There were heart-shaped balloons and rose petals sprinkled all around. When they walked back in the room after shopping, Mark hit play and their favorite song, "Chasing Cars" by Snow Patrol, drifted through the room. They finished the day with a stop by the jewelry store where they drank champagne, and Lauren picked out a ring. The evening was capped with dinner at P.F. Chang's where both of their families were gathered for a surprise celebration.

Mark and Lauren were married in May 2021 at their home church, St. Elizabeth Ann Seton, in Valparaiso with a reception at County Line Orchard. "We were going to honeymoon in Italy, but the pandemic made travel too chaotic," says Lauren. "Instead, we went to Myrtle Beach, South Carolina and had a lovely time relaxing on the beach and at the pool."

The Smiths continue to enjoy dancing professionally and running their Fred Astaire Dance Studio. In 2019, Mark sold his Indianapolis and Schererville locations and now devotes all of his energy to Valparaiso. Students

range in age from four to 93 and the studio is a hub of activity with teaching, training, performances, and coaching by visiting national and world champions. "Our group is amazing," says Lauren. "We call them our Fred Astaire dance family." The group often travels to local, regional and national competitions and workshops. "We recently went to a Fred Astaire conference and trained with Jesse DeSoto from *Dancing with the Stars*," shares Mark.

In 2022, during a competition in Indianapolis, Mark was dancing and Lauren—36 weeks pregnant—was spectating. That night at the hotel Lauren woke up when her water broke. After quickly packing up their things, they googled the nearest ER and zipped over there only to find it was an urgent care and closed. Thankfully they made it to a Franciscan hospital and little Zachariah made his way into the world. He's now 2 ½ and as busy as any young toddler can be. The couple's second son, Elijah (1) is learning how to walk and likes playing with big brother Zachariah. Both boys enjoy traveling with their parents and as Lauren reports, "By the time Zacharia was one, he had been in both the Atlantic and Pacific oceans."

Whenever a dance competition involves travel, the Smiths like to bring the boys along, sometimes with a nanny or Lauren's mom to help with the kids. They've been to Las Vegas, San Diego, Myrtle Beach, and Orlando where they visited Disney World.

At home in Valparaiso, the Smith family, along with their three dogs—Hank, a bluetick coonhound, and Great Danes Indigo and Violet—takes full advantage of their 5 ½ acres with fields to romp in and a creek to fish in. "We bought our house in February 2020 and remodeled it," says Mark. "And we have great neighbors." The Smiths love nature and the



FISHING AND BOATING.

wildlife that abounds just outside their home with plenty of deer, and flocks of turkeys foraging for bugs and seeds. "We sometimes see peacocks traveling with the turkeys. Down by the creek, the dogs go crazy when the blue herons come to fish. And if you have a good eye, you can see mink hunting along the creek." Mark has also caught quite a few Chinook salmon right from his own creek.



The family also enjoys growing a vegetable garden each year. According to Lauren, "Zachariah loves to pick a tomato and eat it like an apple." Using raised beds, they grow peppers, cucumbers, green beans, squash

and watermelons. Zachariah also likes to ride his kid lawnmower with attached trailer around their land. "It's remote controlled by us for now,

but when he's older, he'll be able to ride it himself."

During the fall and spring, you'll find Mark and Lauren heading into the woods to forage for wild mushrooms. In the spring they gather morels and in the fall it's Hen of the Woods and chicken mushrooms which, according to Mark, "tastes just like chicken wings!" He and Lauren also hunt deer and did quite a bit of it while dating. Mark grew up hunting and fishing while Lauren did not. But she loves it now and it's not uncommon for the pair to be in dancing shoes one day and hunting boots the next.

The Smiths own a boat and spend as much time as they can on Lake Michigan with their boys, friends, and family. "One of our best memories was the Lake Michigan circle tour we did in the summer of 2019," says Lauren. Heading clockwise and with four dogs in tow, they traveled by car for two weeks trailering the boat, and putting it in the water at stops along the way in Wisconsin, the western UP, eastern UP, and Michigan. "It was peaceful and crazy cool," says Mark. In Wisconsin they heard

the call of the cuckoo birds, saw Michigan's Pictured Rocks and viewed the horizon where Lauren "couldn't tell where Lake Superior ended, and the sky began."

Exploring new destinations is just one aspect of this multifaceted couple. From cha chas to children, and morels to mambos, Mark and Lauren embody a life infused with flora, fauna, foxtrots and endless adventure.

**Fred Astaire Studios is located in
Downtown Valparaiso at 107 Lincolnway.**

**Feel free to call Mark and Lauren
at 219-510-0123 to schedule your
introductory dance lesson.**

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