

“Breaking Barriers One Dance Step At A Time”

by

Susie Spann

“I was going to hate it.”

That was Sally Green's ** reaction when she reluctantly agreed to participate in partnership dancing lessons with Elaine Cox, her partner of forty years. For better or worse, they had done almost everything together since they began breaking traditional barriers in the 1970's.

Elaine and Sally met during their individual services in the United States Navy. They became a couple in 1975 and expanded their family with the addition of a son in 1983. By 2010 their son was grown and their own physical ailments prompted them to try something new. They needed something to help them repair in a physical sense while they grew as partners. That may be why Sally agreed to the first lesson, albeit with reservations.

Reservations disappeared after the first lesson. Sally and Elaine enjoyed the new connection between one another and with staff at the Cozytown, California Dance Studio. They also felt an immediate difference physically. There was just one barrier, but it was one the couple knew well.

“We're not a traditional couple,” Sally proclaimed. “Will that be a problem?”

“No, it's not a problem,” replied Carl Hamm, owner of the Cozytown studio.

“Elaine and Sally are not special because they're different,” Carl is fond of saying. “They are special because of who they are. They're family.”

“They make you feel it's OK,” Elaine said, explaining the connection they have with their Dance Studio family. “It's comfortable. Feel at home. Have a good time.”

During lessons and group classes, Elaine and Sally discovered an unexpected strength: They segued smoothly between roles of leader and follower.

“OK. I'm leading now,” Elaine said, remembering the first performance when she transitioned from a follower to a leader.

“Now you can get an idea what it's like from the other end.” Sally smiled at her partner.

What would these two ground-breaking, non-traditional Navy veterans do next? Carl Hamm answered the question when he asked them to participate in a popular franchised competition schedule for the middle of January in 2017.

As the first competition on the west coast to open its doors to non-traditional couples, this Franchised Competition allowed Elaine and Sally to grow as dancers and break a few barriers along the way. They competed in four rumba heats, joining the ranks of three other Cozytown Dance Studio students who dared to try open-gender competition for the first time. With encouraging cries and applause from a receptive audience, Sally and Elaine laughed at their

nervous twitters and gained confidence with every dance step.

What thoughts crossed Sally's and Elaine's minds as they finished their final heat?

“Our first thought was about Carl Hamm, that this opportunity was all because of his vision. Bring open gender to Franchised Competition. The respect he has for all his dance family. It was exhilarating.”

“Carl and the rest of the dance family are the heroes here,” Sally has said on more than one occasion. “The more we break the barriers the more it (open gender dancing) will not be an issue.”

** Although true names appeared in the original article, published in the Fred Astaire Franchised Dance Studios magazine, inStep, names of people and businesses in this article have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.