

*A handful of vintage cars* sits serenely against the curb, untroubled by the sleek 20<sup>th</sup> century automobiles zigging and zagging down the street.

Swing music, circa 1953 or so, drifts through an open doorway. Men and women, sporting dresses and suits that have been hanging in a closet for goodness-only-knows how many years, climb steps while clinging to the arms of children, siblings, and various caregivers. Another caregiver carefully guides a wheelchair up the not-so-gentle slope of a ramp. Once inside, the scent of root beer merges with sweet ice cream to tickle the nose. Decorations, fashion magazines, poodle skirts and saddle shoes complete the scene.

This is not a remake of a time travel movie. No one is going to climb into or out of a DeLorean and alter the course of history. Instead, this is an attempt to reach people for whom memory is the only way they have of communicating. Each sight, scent, sound, texture and taste is designed to bridge a gap with people for whom dementia in various forms has isolated them from their friends, their families, and even their sense of self. For the patients, this may be a last chance to regain dignity and their love of life. For the members of *Care to Dance, Inc.* of Bartow, Florida, this is a chance to give back to their community by sharing their dance journey in a relatively new treatment called reminiscence therapy.

This is where **reminiscence therapy** played a key role: *Care to Dance* began to encourage seniors to dig through their closets and pull out those old ‘Sunday best’ dresses or suits that were gathering dust; to don an outfit they thought they would never wear again; to relive that moment from the past and bring it into the present.

To see how this caring group of dancers adapted their skills to connect with older patients, it is necessary to take a short trip back in time to the year 1990. In that year a Florida attorney by the name of Debra Sutton established the Sutton Law Firm to serve the needs of clients in various family matters.

**Reminiscence Therapy (RT)** uses tangible prompts to initiate a discussion of past events with a person or group of people. Prompts often include photographs, household items, music or sound recordings, or anything else that reminds a person of a particular event in his or her past.

The use of RT helps seniors, with or without dementia, remain involved in the lives of family and caregivers and provides them a sense of belonging as well as a sense of importance.

[www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov)

Debra maintained a high level of commitment to her clients and to their caregivers through her law practice, the Sutton Law Firm.

Her motto “*Where Family Matters,*” was more than a slogan: Debra was fully dedicated to her duty.

Many of Debra’s clients suffered from various illnesses and injuries that impaired their cognitive skills, thus affecting their way of life. Dementia played a role in the lives of many of her clients, frequently creating a need for family members to create a guardianship over their loved ones. A spouse was forced to take legal custody of a spouse. Adult children turned into caregivers for their parents. Parents acquired guardianship over their adult



Debra Sutton and Buddy Johnston Founders of Care to Dance, Inc.

children.

Unsurprisingly, Debra’s faithfulness to her clients took its toll on her. She found it necessary to find a way to escape the harsh realities of the office.

Debra thought of the positive reactions her clients experienced through the music she had her staff play in her law office. For Debra music plus movement to relieve stress equaled dance. She found a dance instructor and took the first steps in an activity that would not only change her life, but that would have a positive impact on more than 1,500 seniors in just over three and a half years.

As with many professionals who turn to ballroom dance in their personal lives, Debra found a new lease on life and an unexpected family. She was able to put the stress of work behind her while she danced. Yet her commitment to her clients and others like them persisted beyond office hours. Debra and friends shared their love of dance with seniors and performed for people in nursing homes.

*“First we danced for them, then we danced with them.”*

In 2014, Debra and Buddy Johnston founded Care to Dance, Inc. They took their dance to senior citizens in nursing homes and performed for them, hoping to brighten their days a little. At the beginning, they approached the dancing with a casual attitude, with low-key costumes and understated themes. They saw positive results, but many seniors remained passive at best. Certain that more could be done, they observed their audience and noticed that when the dancers marched into the room, dressed in matching jackets sporting the Care to Dance logo and hauling trunks behind them, the audience visibly sat up and took notice. The act of being ‘an act’ struck a chord with people who were used to being parked in a seat or a wheelchair while life went on around them.



Focused activity, sounds of people wheeling trunks, the smells of a performance venue, combined with a little extra ‘bling’ on costumes, made it clear that

*‘something was about to happen.’*

Seniors noticed *Care to Dance*, and *Care to Dance* responded. Simple, specific, and plain presentations morphed into elaborate presentations complete with props and the glitter and glam of a stage production. No longer was the audience passive while others lived around their sedentary chairs: The audience responded until they became part of the show.

*Care to Dance* took note of the change in their audience and researched the available treatment options for people with various forms of neurological disorders. Their investigation took them to the experts in the Music Therapy department at the University of Florida in Gainesville. The University of Florida Department of Neurology conducts research into multiple facets of



neurological disorders, including forms of dementia such as Alzheimer's Disease. It was through their research that Debra and Buddy learned about Reminiscence Therapy and decided to incorporate it into their program. Witnessing the change in their audience with their own eyes, they believed that they could use music, costumes, sights, sounds, and smells reach their audience and turn them from passively parked patients into active participants.

It worked. Their seniors transformed from mere spectators into people who moved, danced, talked, and participated in the show.

**One memorable moment** for Debra occurred when 'Mr. J.' (not his real name) was wheeled into the room at a Care to Dance Performance. His caregivers literally 'parked' the wheelchair by the door with the reasoning that he would need to be removed before the performance was over. His history indicated that he would begin making sounds that would disrupt the show, hence the need to make a quick 'getaway.'

**Contrary to expectations**, his caregivers brought him back within a few minutes. For the first time in eight months, Mr. J. had opened his eyes and responded to an outside stimulus.



*Although Care to Dance performs many shows and sponsors multiple events throughout the year, it is important to note that their performances are ‘entertaining but not actually entertainment.’*

*The concept has been to encourage patients to interact to the full extent of their ability, with a focus on repairing or improving cognition, memory, and depression.*

Care to Dance had found a way to make a difference in the lives of their audience during the performance. The change was dramatic. Spectators opened their eyes to see the show. They moved feet and hands in time to the music. Some may have talked about the show at home. encourage seniors to dig through their closets and pull out those old ‘Sunday best’ dresses or suits that were gathering dust; to don an outfit they thought they would never wear again; to relive that moment from the past and bring it into the present.

Despite the fancy costumes and a show-dance attitude, members of Care to Dance, Inc. are down-to-earth and approachable. Co-founder Buddy Johnston, with a cap of white hair that makes him look older than his true age (very early in his 60’s as of 2018), radiates an approachable demeanor that older audiences find appealing. They think he is their age, although he may



easily be one or even two decades younger than many of them. Always willing to adapt to others as needed, Buddy has no problem pulling a lady onto the dance floor for a salsa.

Care to Dance, Inc. is a 501-c3 charity.

Contributions are tax deductible.

Contributions do not have to be in the form of money, although that helps. This is a great place to donate ballroom dresses, jewelry, items that can be turned into costumes to stimulate the minds of seniors and others with cognitive impairments.

If you shop on Amazon, you can make a small contribution every time you shop. Just go to 'Amazon Smiles' and select Care to Dance as your preferred charity. If you don't see Care to Dance in the list of options, enter it in the search bar of the Amazon Smiles charities section. You will pay your regular price and Amazon will donate a portion of the price to the charity you select

