

The Dreamer Behind the Dance  
Written by Susie R Spann

Erin Drake had two loves in her youth: dance and helping others. Those loves stayed with her as she grew from the awkward stages of childhood into the eager maturity of a high school graduate and, finally, into a confident woman with a Master's Degree in education. Following the advice of others, she decided to push dance into a secondary position and 'get a real job.' Erin taught kindergarten in Los Angeles for three years, learning to adapt to a variety of personalities, skill sets, and learning abilities. She held on to her love of dance, however, rushing from her classroom at 3:00 pm to dance and to teach well into the evening. She rose early the next day to do it all over again.

And again.

And again.

Fearing that a 'burn out' was inevitable, Erin left her life as a kindergarten teacher in Los Angeles and moved to the San Francisco Bay area. Drawing on the skills and ability to adapt obtained from time spent with children in school and adults in the studio, she worked with a nonprofit to teach early childhood literacy to other teachers. Under her expertise, a single classroom flourished and expanded to influence an additional 1500 classrooms. Erin was successful, influential and still in her twenties.

It was not enough.

Erin moved to Orange County in order to work with a professional dance partner. Through the skills developed over many years as a dancer, a teacher, and an innovator, she began to notice a few things about her students, many of whom were at the optimum age to experience the onset of dementia and other cognitive impairments. Erin saw the initial signs of deterioration. She also recognized the way in which dance slowed and, in some cases, reversed those symptoms. She asked other dancers if they knew people who might be helped through dance and heard about a student with cerebral atrophy. Dance might help him, if he could overcome the obstacles that come with the cost of medications plus the expense of regular ballroom dance lessons.

Erin had her answer.

Every dance step she had taken and taught, every milestone between earning her Master's to teaching others to reach students, had led her to this junction. Without hesitation, Erin reached out to the student in need.

She showed him how to clap to the rhythm.

She taught him to hear the beat.

She introduced the tango, the foxtrot, the waltz, and the cha cha.

By week five he began to smile and his posture improved.

In week seven he stopped taking sleeping medication.

In week eight he stopped taking medication for dizziness.

In week ten he could walk independently up to a half of a mile.

In twelve weeks he was walking a full mile, and in fourteen weeks he was walking two miles a day. Even if he felt ill, he refused to skip his weekly dance lessons. He just felt too good while dancing.

Erin had more than just an answer. Now she had a goal. She would take this program to a higher level by reaching out to other dancers, both professional and amateur, to offer free lessons to individuals with early onset neurological disorders. Ballroom RX was born. It would grow, as would the students and the dancers who work together to share the healing power of dance.