

MPR News | Minnesota Now Former state Sen. Ember Reichgott Junge lays out health benefits of partner dance in new book 01KM3N0527RXGA9G5ZZHDVXGSR

NINA MOINI: When Ember Reichgott Junge was a young state senator representing the New Hope area back in the mid-1990s, she walked into a partner dance studio looking for a husband. And she did find one, but it turns out he doesn't dance. However, she did find a lifelong passion, a deep connection to partner dancing.

And years later, she looked into its impact on health and well-being. She's written a book exploring the surprising ways dance can transform people's lives and health. It's called the *Dance of Resilience*. Former state Senator Ember Reichgott Junge is on the line now to tell us about it. Thank you so much for your time this afternoon.

EMBER Well, and thank you for having me.

REICHGOTT

JUNGE:

NINA MOINI: I love that you said I need a husband. I'll just walk in somewhere and find me one. I'm sure you were very busy at the time, and then trying to juggle a lot of things. What impact did dancing and going to that first class have on you as you were a young politician navigating the Minnesota State Capitol in the '90s?

EMBER Well, I was at the age of 35 when I finally decided I needed to walk into that studio to find a husband. And as you said, I did find one. But he does not dance unless he has five beers.

REICHGOTT

JUNGE:

The thing that I learned, though, is that dance changed me. And you're right. I was a very young attorney and a state senator in the 1980s and early '90s. I was in my late 20s, early 30s, and I instinctively thought I had to act like a man.

So I wore those little ties at my neck, and I always had to look good. I'm sure the older women in the audience like me are nodding about those little ties at the neck. And I had to be professional. I had to be perfect. I couldn't make a mistake, or at least publicly.

And as you said, I just didn't have time for relationships. And then what happened-- I found this dance teacher who honestly became more of a life coach. And the first thing is he had to take me out of my comfort zone. And so he suggested that I wear those little skimpy dresses that you see when dancers perform. And I said, senators don't wear dresses like that, but I could explore my femininity, and I could try it on. And I felt so good. It just hugged my body.

And so I forgot all about the state budget when I was on the dance floor. And I could just laugh at myself. And the bottom line is, I had a safe place to be me, the authentic me. And I could let go. I could make a mistake. I could be vulnerable. And I discovered my authentic self, which had been hidden for so long. And I could love myself, and I could love my future husband when he walked into my life a few years later.

And on our wedding day over 32 years ago, my husband Mike and I made a bargain. I wouldn't teach him how to dance, and he wouldn't teach me how to golf. And we've kept that bargained for 32 years.

NINA MOINI: Oh, I really love what you're saying about finding yourself and breaking out of expectations and boxes. I think so many people and so many women can relate to that. How is dance still a part of your life or your daily routine all these years later?

EMBER Well, dance has become my community, and the reason that I wrote this book is because during the pandemic,
REICHGOTT we all missed that community greatly. And so I started writing my own story, and then I interviewed others who I
JUNGE: had gotten to know. And I was so taken aback by the stories of others that I just couldn't stop.

And so today, I just love going to the dance studio, and I see people of all ages. And you know what? I always feel better when I'm dancing. I don't care if I'm stressed, I'm angry. Whatever it was, I just feel better when I leave.

NINA MOINI: What is it about partner dance-- which that can be different dances just with a partner, right? Is there one you like the most? And what do you like about-- why not individual dance?

EMBER Well, first of all, with the health benefits, the main health benefit of partner dance versus individual dance is that
REICHGOTT it lowers the risk of dementia considerably. In fact, a study of 2003, a landmark study still exists that says that of
JUNGE: all the activities that people looked at, that this one, partner dance, reduced the risk of dementia by 76%. I'm not kidding.

Now, that was compared to things like individual things like walking or maybe playing tennis or some of these other things. That had no effect on dementia. Why was that? Because you're reacting to another person, another individual. And so that causes your brain to create new pathways which are there to protect you in case you do get dementia in the ordinary pathways. And so line dancing is wonderful, but not the same impact for reduction of dementia. And that's the difference. That's why partner dance.

NINA MOINI: Is there a type of dance that you like the most?

EMBER For me, I like particularly the traditional, the waltz and the foxtrot and tango and also the rhythm, like cha-cha
REICHGOTT and rumba. But there are so many things for people out there right now. I mean, salsa, bachata-- whatever you
JUNGE: like, whatever is for you.

And the other thing you mentioned earlier is, do I have a partner? Well, yes. But you know what? I don't dance with my husband, and you don't need to have a partner. And so one of the goals of my book is to inspire more people to experience the physical and mental and social benefits of dance. And that would be especially for older adults like me. I'm 72.

Now, I walk into my dance studio, and there are two gentlemen I see there very often. One is late 70s, one is in his 80s, and they just started to dance. I'm serious. They just started to dance several years ago, and they love it. It's a community for them. They lost their spouses. It is a safe place for them to dance with other people. No expectations. And so for people who don't have a partner, this is probably one of the safest places you can go to find another friend or perhaps a future life partner.

NINA MOINI: And you're really passionate-- perhaps bringing some of your history-- as a lawmaker into it about getting these resources to people through their insurance and making it more a part of that health world, right?

EMBER Absolutely. Dementia is just one of the many benefits. You'll remember that Dr. Vivek Murthy was the surgeon
REICHGOTT general who said that there was a loneliness epidemic in our country. And that has not gone away. Obviously, it
JUNGE: may be a little bit worse. Excuse me.

So what he found is that loneliness or social isolation can increased risk for premature death by up to 29%. That is as much as smoking up to 15 cigarettes a day. So health and well-being, just going into the dance studio, having that community right there is a benefit.

Now, going on to some of the other things-- Parkinson's. Oh, my goodness! Parkinson's is just really a wonderful opportunity for people to try to use partner dance to help relieve debilitating symptoms, to help improve mobility and stability, and to decrease rigidity and improve facial expression. All of that has been proven.

And there is a group called Dance for PD that exists in 450 communities in 28 countries where that is already happening. And you really can make a difference in reducing the symptoms of Parkinson's by becoming a dancer.

NINA MOINI: And just lastly, there are all these benefits. A lot of us know when something is really good for us, but we don't always do it. I wonder what you would say. We just have about a minute left. I wish we had more time, but what would you say to somebody who maybe they are older, and they've never done anything like that, and maybe they're starting to feel aches and pains and thinking, I don't know if that's for me? What is the one thing you would tell someone to inspire them to do something that is outside of their comfort zone?

EMBER REICHGOTT JUNGE: Just get started. It's usually a friend who takes you to a studio. Just go and watch and then take time to meet people, and take a few steps at a time. That's all you need to do. This is for people who might think they never can dance. I'll just use veterans as an example. People who are veterans really do benefit from dance.

There was an orthopedic surgeon who was doing a showcase before an audience, and he bent down, lifted his pants leg, and revealed a prosthesis from his knee to his ankle, and he could hear the audience gasp. Well, he touched people, and a big marine came up to him and said, I'm so glad you showed me. You gave me hope that if something happened to me, there's things that can be done to help me. Other veterans say the same thing.

NINA MOINI: Absolutely. Thank you so much for coming by *Minnesota Now* and telling us about the new book. I love what you said. Take it a few steps at a time. Ember Reichgott Junge, thank you.

EMBER REICHGOTT JUNGE: Thank you.

NINA MOINI: The book is *The Dance of Resilience*. It'll be at Inkwell Books in Northeast Minneapolis with Ember on March 31.