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Humboldt couple steps out in style on the dance floor

By Kent Thompson

It is said that good things come to those who wait.

For Humboldt's Jay and Rita Bancroft, those good things have come arm-in-arm and toe-to-toe.

"We've been married 39 years and it took 30 years for Rita to get me to dance class," Jay said.

The couple has been on the floor practically non-stop ever since.

They've converted part of their basement into a late '50s style sock hop scene, complete with checkerboard floor tile, a jukebox and early rock 'n' roll memorabilia.

They recently won the 2009 Rock the Roof dance contest with the finals held at the Clay County Fair.

It all started innocently enough, about a decade ago.

"I like big band music and I had a CD. I was listening to Glenn Miller's "In the Mood," and my daughter told me she could teach me to swing dance to it," Jay Bancroft recalls.

"Later, she got engaged and Rita and I were going to surprise her at her wedding by being able to dance," said Jay.

The couple took dance classes at Iowa Central Community College from instructors Bud and Pat Sternquist of Boone. The Sternquists likewise wanted to be able to dance at their daughter's wedding. They learned and caught the dancing bug, dancing competitively and teaching hundreds of couples in north central Iowa throughout the years.

The Bancrofts became two of the Sternquists' most prized pupils, taking the beginning dance class four consecutive years.

"You have to understand the basic moves," Rita says.

"I'm sure when we started we looked like we had two left feet. It was all Greek to everyone. By the second time, we learned most of the moves and by the fourth time we had refined it."

The couple just completed intermediate dance classes for the second time.

Classes last six weeks.



Jay and Rita Bancroft say that dancing is not only fun and great exercise, but it has brought them closer together as a couple.



What started out as a lark has become a bit of an obsession for Jay and Rita Bancroft, when it comes to dancing. It's a healthy passion, however. The couple finds dances throughout the state on the Internet at www.iowadance.com. Their favorite band is the four-piece rock 'n' roll group The Rivas.

"It helps get us off the couch," Rita laughed.

"It's like anything," Jay said, "you have to be ready to learn. You can have the darnedest time learning something that you just can't quite get. Then, you come back to it later, and you know it," he said.

"Every time out on the floor you feel like you learn a little more," he commented.

The classes teach a full range of ballroom dances such as the waltz, the rumba, the fox trot, polka, swing and others.

"If you can fox trot or swing dance, you can dance to 75 or 80 percent of the music you hear," Jay said.

The Bancrofts admitted to being a little intimidated when they first thought about trying out some of their dancing moves in public.

"When we first went to a dance we wanted to go as far away as possible, so no one would know us," Jay said.

"You think everyone is looking at you, but that's not the case. They're just out there enjoying themselves."

"It doesn't matter what you look like, as long as you're not sitting on a chair," Rita said.

The couple has been trained in all types of ballroom dancing, but their niche has been the '50s music of the rock 'n' roll era.

The Bancrofts can usually be found going to a nearly once a week. They attend dances at the famous Surf Ballroom in Clear Lake, Lake Robbins near Woodward, the Electric Park Ballroom in Waterloo, the Eagle's Club in Fort Dodge and the Iowa Rock 'n' Roll Music Association's concerts at the ballroom in Arnold's Park.

The couple also enjoys going to listen and dance to Humboldt County's own "Fabulous Uniques," when possible.

The Bancrofts' favorite dancing venue is Stormin' Norman's in Waterbury, NE. It features an old gym that's been remade into a dance floor. There's a classic car below the stage.

One thing the couple has really enjoyed since getting "happy feet," is going on cruises and dancing in the ship's ballroom.

"You can dance every night for hours on end. Sometimes an older woman will see us and will come up and say, 'my husband and I used to dance like that.' I'll loan Jay out so he can dance with the lady. We were on one cruise where we were doing the cha-cha and a lady asked Jay to dance. She loved it.

"We get nice notes from the families saying it made their mother's vacation being able to do that," Rita said.

Grand prize winners

Jay and Rita dance for the fun of it, but found out that their enjoyment rubs off on others.

This past summer, the Iowa Rock 'N' Roll Music Association hosted weekly dances at the Arnold's Park Ballroom.

"Some friends of ours encouraged us to sign up at one of the dances," Rita said.

Judging was based on audience reaction, charitable monetary contributions and the opinion of the judge

or judges.

The Bancrofts managed to be one of the 10 weekly winners.

The winners were invited to the Clay County Fair in Spencer in mid-September for a dance off. The Bancrofts were one of six couples who were able to make the trip, and Jay and Rita ended up dancing before professional dance instructors.

They had a chance to perform on the grandstand and were judged number one, receiving the grand prize of a 32-inch flat screen TV and a DVD player.

"It was a nice honor and we sure had a lot of fun," Rita said.

A concert by Ricky Nelson's twin sons, Gunnar and Matthew, followed the dance off.

But Rita said the couple isn't looking for contests.

Twirling time

"We dance for the fun of it and sometimes competition can take the fun out. We still make mistakes, we're still learning. That's one of the reasons we still take lessons. And once you learn a step or a move, you keep craving more," she said.

While the Bancrofts dated steadily in high school, Jay waited nearly three decades to put on his dancing shoes.

The Bancrofts say that while programs like "Dancing with the Stars," and "So You Think You Can Dance," may have elevated the popularity of dancing, the shows aren't really true to what ballroom dancing is all about.

"They seem to do a particular routine. It's not really what we would call social or touch dancing," the couple said.

"Dancing today is nothing like it was in the '40s and '50s. It was a huge social event. At one time, there were more dance halls and ballrooms in Iowa, per capita, than anywhere in the U.S.," Jay said.

"That is (the social aspect) one of the great things we gained from taking it up," he noted.

"We have met so many nice people from all over the state," Rita adds.

"There is a group of us that will get together at dances but also meet socially outside of dancing. It's a pretty tight-knit group," Rita said.

Dancing is one aspect of life that in a way helps redefine the traditional roles of marriage.

"The instructor says that you are boss on the dance floor," Jay said. "The man does the leading and the decision-making."

And while the woman follows the man's lead, a good dancing couple will flow together in a syncopated rhythm that is an unspoken language.

"From hand pressure to body movements, there are a lot of unspoken cues that tell me what the next step or movement is," Rita said.

Jay said following the tempo and beat of the music is part of the key to being a good dancer.

"Jay will emulate motions with his fingers sometimes when listening to music," Rita said.

"We will ask each other what dance we would do to a certain tune we hear on the radio," she added.

The Bancrofts not only fit the part of early rock 'n' roll dancers, they look the part as well. Rita makes her own poodle skirts and decorates them with a '50s motif. She is always open to new ideas.

Jay usually wears bowling shirts and while the couple's costumes are not always matching, they are color coordinated.

Dance shoes are also a must for those people serious about the hobby, as they allow a person to pivot and turn much more easily.

"(Dancing) has changed our lives. We're empty nesters, so it gives us something in common that we have to work on together and communicate with each other (about)," Jay said.

"It doesn't matter - you can be having a bad day and as soon as the music starts, your whole attitude changes," Rita said.

"Whatever's troubling you, all your concerns seem to vanish. For a while, you feel 18 again.

"You may be stiff and hobbling around the house the next day, but you are on an emotional high until the next one. If we don't dance every couple of weeks, I almost have withdrawal," Rita admits.

"We feel very blessed we are able to enjoy it as much as we do," the couple says.

"Life is too short to pass up such a fun activity. We would like to encourage anyone thinking about taking that first step of signing up for a class to do so."

Who knows, you might just be swept off your feet like the Bancrofts.