



RACINE COUNTY - Decker out in a headset microphone, cutoff jean shorts and sneakers, Norm Rennert stands with his back to about a dozen women in the gymnasium. His head is cocked as he looks slightly over his left shoulder, his right knee popped up in what is unmistakably a dancer's pose. "How many guys get to dance with all these beautiful women every day," he calls to the group of a dozen women, his right arm aloft in the air, waiting for the music's beat. "We're not paying you any more (for the compliments)," a woman in the crowd yells back, setting off peals of laughter. After putting on a spicy, Latin-flavored salsa number, those juices were flowing and joints were working. "Should I put on the stripper music, Dorothy?" Rennert called out. "Rock, rock, cross

and hold, rock, rock, cross and hold," Rennert tells his students as he easily glides across the floor. "And just remember if you collapse on the floor, we dance around you." To some, he's just the cat's pajamas.

Yet to look at him, one would never know that just three years ago, Rennert, 70, of Caledonia, suffered an aneurysm and then a stroke - the latter of which he said he thought might have meant the end of his dancing career. It was March 2008, and Rennert said he woke up one morning and had an earache. His mother-in-law was living with he and his wife, Joan, at the time, and she had an eye doctor's appointment that day. But Rennert's condition was worsening. "I had an earache and it started running down into my chest," he said. Then his vision blurred. After seeing the doctor himself, a CAT scan was performed. He had to get to the hospital. "The interesting thing was we had 12 to 14 inches of snow," Joan Rennert cut in.

"They couldn't find an ambulance to take me," Norm said.

"It was eight to 12 hours till he got up there," his wife finished for him.

The aneurysm was located behind his right eye, he said, but hadn't ruptured. He was treated and back to line dancing in about three weeks.

"You miss it," Norm said.

The doctor installed two stents, yet he needed to return to Froedtert Hospital in Wauwatosa about six months later for a checkup of sorts.

But during that procedure, something went awry, he explained.

"(It) caused plaque to be knocked loose," he said.

After the procedure, he tried to swing his leg over the bed and get up but couldn't.

"They stood me up and I collapsed. That's when they knew I'd had a stroke."

It was September 2008, and he actually had suffered a multiple frontal lobe stroke, he explained. It basically rendered his right leg useless.

"I couldn't envision not being able to dance," he said quietly, his voice catching, as students began arriving for class at the Cesar Chavez Community Center, 2221 Douglas Ave. "That devastated me more than anything else."

He recovered because of his physical and mental fitness, said Joan, 69, which the couple attributes to his passion for line dancing.

"I was bound and determined to get that leg to work," he said. "I had to physically throw my leg out and step on it to get it to work ... I had to learn to walk without falling over."

Joan Rennert said her husband recovered in about two months.

"You're still not back to normal," she added with a chuckle and teasing little smile, reaching over to touch his arm and looking into his eyes. "He can't run at all anymore."

"I'm thankful I can move at all," he reminds.

Rennert said he learned to line dance in a night class he took years ago. But he didn't begin teaching line dancing classes until 2005, he said.

"I've always loved to dance. It's good exercise, physically and mentally. My wife wasn't into dancing and I wanted to dance."

And since line dancing doesn't require a partner, he turned to that style, he added.

But soon, he was taking some of the newer students aside to help them during his instructor's classes. Rennert said one day the instructor told him she set up a class for him to lead, and it met that same day.

He's now teaching nine classes a week in southeastern Wisconsin and northern Illinois.

Middle-aged and elderly women in tennis shoes, sandals and two sporting vivid red cowgirl boots, sang softly to a slow, soulful country song as they stepped, slid and sashayed across the floor.

"We make dancing fun," Rennert said. "My motto is 'dance like nobody's watching.' It's relaxing."

"Just have fun. Don't care how good you are," he advised. "I've had people tell me I have three left feet and they're still in my class. Nobody learns to line dance right off the bat."

That's because there are so many terms and steps to learn, he explained.

"It takes brain activity along with muscle activity," he said.

Shirley Blasi, 81, of Kenosha, attends Rennert's classes at the Cesar Chavez Community Center. A short, petite woman, she bursts into a grin when told she doesn't look her 81 years.

"And I had major surgery in February and the doctor said he's never seen anyone recover (so quickly)," Blasi said, attributing her quick recuperation to her physical and mental fitness.

Often, people may be hesitant to join one of the line dancing classes because they don't know how to do it, Blasi said.

"We all make mistakes. Even the teacher does," she pointed out. "But his memory (is amazing)!"

"Sometimes I call it my therapy class," said Dorothy Karasti, 74, of Kenosha.

Karasti, a former retail clerk, said she began line dancing almost 13 years ago after she retired.

"It's talking to other people and socializing," she said between songs. "You got a bad day and come in here and laugh and dance."

To inquire about classes, contact Rennert at (262) 930-2698.