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## With Groovability, wheelchair dancers dismiss notions of disability

By ERIC ADLER  
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For JoAnne Fluke, it is all about the freedom ... the movement ... the *feeling*.

Oh, the feeling of ballroom dancing in a wheelchair.

The cha-cha. The salsa. The “downright sexy rumba,” she said. Then there is the Viennese waltz.

“It makes me feel beautiful, elegant, like a lady,” Fluke said.

Ebullient and auburn-haired, the Ottawa, Kan., resident was born with a condition called caudal regression. Her legs, with no feeling, are tiny, the size of baby legs, webbed at the knees and all but nothing. They lie tucked beneath her so that when seated, her body looks like half a body, a torso in a chair.

But on the dance floor, when she hears the swell of the waltz, she’s transported — lifted into the air by her teacher and able-bodied partner, Chris Pruitt, and swept into his arms. They dance face to face, body to body. Fluke’s right arm extends straight. Her back arches in elegant repose. Her head tilts regally.

“I don’t see my disability when I’m dancing,” Fluke said. “I see me.”

At 32, Fluke is spirited, bold, a former Miss Wheelchair Kansas, who from middle school through college at Baker University never shied away from the spotlight or had a single qualm about lowering herself from her chair to dance on her hands.

Loath to allow her disability to limit her, she tried out for the ABC program “The Bachelor” in 2002 when its producers rolled through Kansas City.

“You’re talking to a girl who, when she was 4 or 5 years old, wanted to be the first disabled Little Orphan Annie on Broadway,” she said.

Still, the idea that she would help create what, in the last 17 months, has become a small yet growing group of wheelchair ballroom dancers in Kansas City never occurred to her.

But it’s happened nonetheless.

In the last year, Pruitt, Fluke and others formed a nonprofit alternative dance organization called Groovability (as opposed to “disability”).

“I didn’t want to be the only one to have this opportunity,” Fluke said. “It’s too wonderful.”

Now, each Saturday, Fluke and maybe three or four friends roll their chairs out on the wood floor at Bella Studio in Westport’s Manor Square to practice in front of the wall-size mirror.

Tiny white Christmas lights hang from a low ceiling.

“We’re going to do some cha-cha today,” Pruitt, 31, said to the class on a recent Saturday.

To the dancers, it already seems like so much has happened since the whole thing began last year with a phone call and a lie.

“Do you teach wheelchair ballroom dancing?” Fluke asked Pruitt on the telephone back in March 2007.

Fluke and her 28-year-old friend, Tiffany Simpson, a speech pathologist from Kansas City, North, who has spina bifida, had been researching wheelchair ballroom dancing on the Internet. They work together as summer camp counselors in Excelsior Springs teaching children with spina bifida to dance.

On YouTube, they found dozens of videos of elegant women and men in wheelchairs: precise ballroom dancers in tuxedos and sparkling gowns, their hands clasped — one moving in the chair, the other standing — as crowds roared with applause during an international competition.

“Both of us were like, ‘I want to do this!’ ” Simpson said.

But when Fluke called several local dance studios last year to find a program, she came up empty.

Then she called Pruitt, whose Bella Studio had just opened in June 2006 and had been struggling.

So when Fluke asked Pruitt about whether he held classes, he lied.

“Yes,” Pruitt told her, even though he had barely heard of wheelchair ballroom dancing.

“I had no clue,” he said.

He educated himself about how wheelchair ballroom dancing started in Sweden in the 1970s and has been huge in Europe ever since.

Next month, on Oct. 24, dancers from scores of nations are expected to gather in Belarus’ capital, Minsk, for the International Paralympic Committee Dance Sport World Championships. In the United States, the sport is still growing, promoted by organizations such as the Wheelchair Dancesport USA Association and the American DanceWheels Foundation.

Early this year, the University of Delaware recognized the sport by starting what is thought to be the first class in wheelchair ballroom dancing at a major university.

Fluke arrived for her first class with Pruitt on April 1, 2007. Other women soon followed.

"I decided I was going to teach people the way I teach everybody," said Pruitt, rangy and lean as a dance bar.

Except there was a difference.

To understand what was possible, to figure out what the body and chair could do together, Pruitt acquired a chair of his own. For four days, he lived as if he had a disability.

"I went to the bathroom from the wheelchair. I showered. I tied my legs together," he said.

"I'll tell you, these women have taught me more about life than anyone, about how nothing can stop you. They have challenged me beyond my abilities, forcing me to come up with creative choreography: how to do this, how to do that."

In the last year, the Groovability dancers have given exhibitions at local studios and at able-bodied competitions from Nebraska to the St. Louis Star Ball. In early August, they joined some 600 able-bodied ballroom dancers at the Heart of America DanceSport Championships in Tiffany Springs.

In exhibitions, Fluke can leave her chair. But she knows that in real competition it's not allowed. Wheelchair ballroom dancers must remain seated. The chair, although it can be spun or snapped or even tilted, must remain on at least one wheel at all times.

Back in class, Pruitt hopped in his chair and rolled to the front of the class.

"And we're going to do crisscrosses and breaks with swivels today," Pruitt told the group.

The five Groovability women lined up in a row behind him.

Along with Fluke and Simpson, there was Donna Janes, 57, of Lee's Summit, who had polio as a child, then later took up wheelchair tennis and bowling.

"I truly believe that if you can move an eyelash, you can dance," she said.

There was Jennifer Simmons, 49, of Independence, a paraplegic from childhood, a dog trainer and horsewoman who found that wheelchair dancing brought her back out of a winter slump. And Lorraine Cannistra, 39, of Lawrence, who cried when she first saw Fluke and Janes dancing with Pruitt at an exhibition during the 2007 Miss Wheelchair Kansas pageant.

"It made me cry because it was beautiful," she said. "It was graceful. Those are two words not often put together with wheelchairs. I knew in that moment I wanted to do it."

Pruitt peppered the dancers with instructions, practicing, quarter turns, half turns, full turns: *You want to make sure the arms are down. Rotate at the waist, hips and shoulders. Engage the back. Don't flail about. Keep the neck straight, keep the frame...*

Cha-cha music, then samba, filled the studio. On this day, teenagers from Fluke's church had come as stand-ins for able-bodied partners.

"You have to put emotion into it," Pruitt told the group. "You have to feel it."

The class continued for close to 90 minutes. At the end, the women were breathless. Each would later say that they know, in some ways, that people who see them dance often find them inspirational, breakers of stereotypes and the like.

Although it's not a role any of the dancers disavow, every one of them also said it's not why they do it.

"I get the opportunity to really express how I feel," Fluke said. "It feels like it doesn't matter that I have wheels instead of feet. It's in the heart. It's in the soul."

@ Go to **KansasCity.com** for a photo gallery of Kansas City area wheelchair dancers.

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