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It is never too late to pursue the life you want!

If Judy can start learning dance in her seventies—and do pretty well at it—I don't see one reason why you should doubt yourself. Passion will always bring you places.

by Radhanath Thialan

Tony Robbins once said during his leadership training that “passion is the genesis of genius,” and I am honored to know someone so passionately driven. Her name is Judy Ying. She loves to dance. Judy retired from being a pet store owner in 2015 and did not want to die of boredom, hence she chose to follow her dreams doing what she loves most. “I want to pursue dance and to learn as much as I can. I even stretch every day to maintain my splits!” she said with much enthusiasm. Judy has been learning dance with Yaya Zhang, a graduate of Beijing Dance Academy now living in California. She's continuously showed her support for Yaya and even voluntarily helps her manage the studio – YAYA Dance Academy (YDA) in City of Industry, California. Judy is at the front desk managing attendance while not in dance classes, and helps YDA with their accounting. Her dedication towards the studio touches Yaya's heart so much, she stopped charging Judy for all dance classes. I am blessed to be able to witness this mutually shared passion at YDA.

Judy is an amazing student of mine in the jazz and ballet classes that I teach at YDA. She is very specific and precise with every movement. Judy is ethnically Chinese, born in Beijing, and wanted to be more culturally connected to find her own heritage through dance. She began pursuing dance by learning various Chinese dances, from Mongolian, Han, and Dai culture, to water sleeves and sword dance. She plans to explore more genres of dance especially those of the West to be more versatile and to broaden her knowledge in dance. “I've learned dance for eight years now,” she says, “and I still have not grasped the concept as it is very technical.”

Judy said that despite her age, she loves to challenge herself and compare herself to younger dancers and instructors like me as motivation to grow better daily. She said Yaya finds her one of her most uncoordinated students. Yaya interrupted the interview as she overheard this part of our conversation. “You always move your hands correctly but your legs and other parts of your body will all be wrong while performing the exercise!” she interjected. “However, you never missed a beat in dance.”

When she was younger, Judy did not like to study, especially having to memorize textbooks which she was forced to do in the olden days. “I'd rather be punished than to study and memorize because I am not good at it.” While in school, Judy never gave up finding her passion and found that she loved music and started to play the Gu Zheng (a Chinese string instrument). She has perfect pitch and could play almost anything by ear. During the interview, she asked me to hum a tune, and she replicated it almost instantly on the Gu Zheng. Now that she is learning dance, she realizes the relationship between music and dance and uses music notation as a tool of remembering dance steps. “When I am in your jazz class learning *One – Finale from Chorus Line*, I printed off the music sheet online and notate the steps in my own notation where this indicates the hand in this space and the legs will be here in space,” said Judy as she showed me her scribble of steps from the dance I taught them in class. I was in awe as I did not know how much work she had put into dance to be prepared for my class. “Every time before class, I will pull out the sheets and follow it so that I can remember the movements.”

Originally from China, Judy came to the US to continue her higher education in the 60s. Her siblings tagged along only a year later. They fell in love with California and were hoping to stay but their visas expired after they graduated. Judy and her siblings immediately found a way to be able to stay in the “land of freedom” by joining the Immigrant Investor Program to get a green card. Their father provided them with school fees for tuition, but they used that money to purchase a 7-11 commercial store instead. “Everything was very cheap back then. With the earnings from the 7-11, we then opened a tropical fish pet store that later expanded into a full range pet store with birds, dogs, cats and some other small pets,” said Judy in an accomplished tone. They opened their first pet store in 1976 and branched out to nine stores after ten years.

Today, there is only one pet store surviving because Judy and her siblings pursued other careers eventually. While running the store, they needed to save a lot of money and only rented one room where the three of them squeezed in. She felt that her upbringing in the Chinese culture with the importance in family allowed them to get along very well and never want to be apart from one another. “I took life challenges fearlessly when doing business even when the path is unclear but I followed my passion, I have a dream,” Judy said. “Just do it and don’t think too much! That’s why my pet store lived for over thirty years!” she continued, advising young people to be passionate in whatever they are doing.

Growing up in Beijing, Judy had had to give up her hobby of dance and music in order to make a living. “Since I am retired now, I feel like God has finally allowed me to follow my dreams as dance has always been the thing I wanted. This is my chance to do it!” exclaimed Judy as her voice crescendoed when she spoke. She feels lucky that her friends and family are very supportive of her current decision and come to almost every performance. However, they always tell Judy to eat more as she is the skinniest among her siblings. She claims that dance is the reason why she is in such good shape and is happy to fit into her Cheongsam (a body fitting one piece dress) during Chinese New Year.

Judy is always the earliest student in class, and will always stretch before class while waiting for her classmates. She always makes sure that she is warm and ready to go before class to prevent injuries that, at her age, would take a very long time to recover from. “I am also taking Pilates class once a week now to help me strengthen my muscles to protect my joints as I am getting older, and I try to dance as safe as possible as injury would take my passion away from me for a while, or maybe forever, who knows?” Judy was joking, but I immediately knocked on wood after she said that.

“My attitude towards dancing is similar to how I ran my business in the past thirty years,” she says. Judy’s strong passion definitely brought her places, and she is very happy that she finally has time to pursue the passion that she earlier had to give up. “I know that I am a slow learner in dance, but I still want to learn dance even though I just turned seventy-seven years old in March!” I was really surprised as she doesn’t look seventy-seven at all physically and even in class. She did a *grand jeté* in class an hour before this interview! I can definitely see how passion can lead to success, no matter how long it takes. Stories like this are so satisfying and motivating. I just want to continue chasing my dreams, doing what I love most. Judy quoted an old Chinese saying: “Live till old, learn till old, and there is still one-third not learned.” She said that she still doesn’t know much there is left but is always keen to learn. Her passion for dancing is truly amazing. It would be hard not to feel inspired after listening to Judy telling her story.

Reference after the interview:

I read a few articles after the interview and found that Judy wasn't alone. There were many older adults who are very passionate about dance and finally had time to follow what their heart told them to. This article stood out to me most as this person is very similar to Judy. Doreen Pechey is an elderly woman who passed her Grade 6 ballet examinations with the Royal Dance Academy of Dance at the age of seventy-one and tells us that it is never too late to start dancing. It is always inspiring to read stories like these!

Warren, Jane. "Ballet Star Doreen Proves It's Never Too Late." Express.co.uk, Express.co.uk, 16 Aug. 2016, www.express.co.uk/life-style/life/700760/Ballet-star-Doreen-proves-never-too-late.

In June 2018, dancer and choreographer Rad Thialan graduated with a dance degree from University of California, Irvine, where he then entered the MFA in Dance program.