

Great success stories need one imperative, hard work. Bailing hay was her first job Digging in the dirt was a daily routine for her parents and her.

Her father was a rancher and mother a trained classical musician who played the piano and harp.

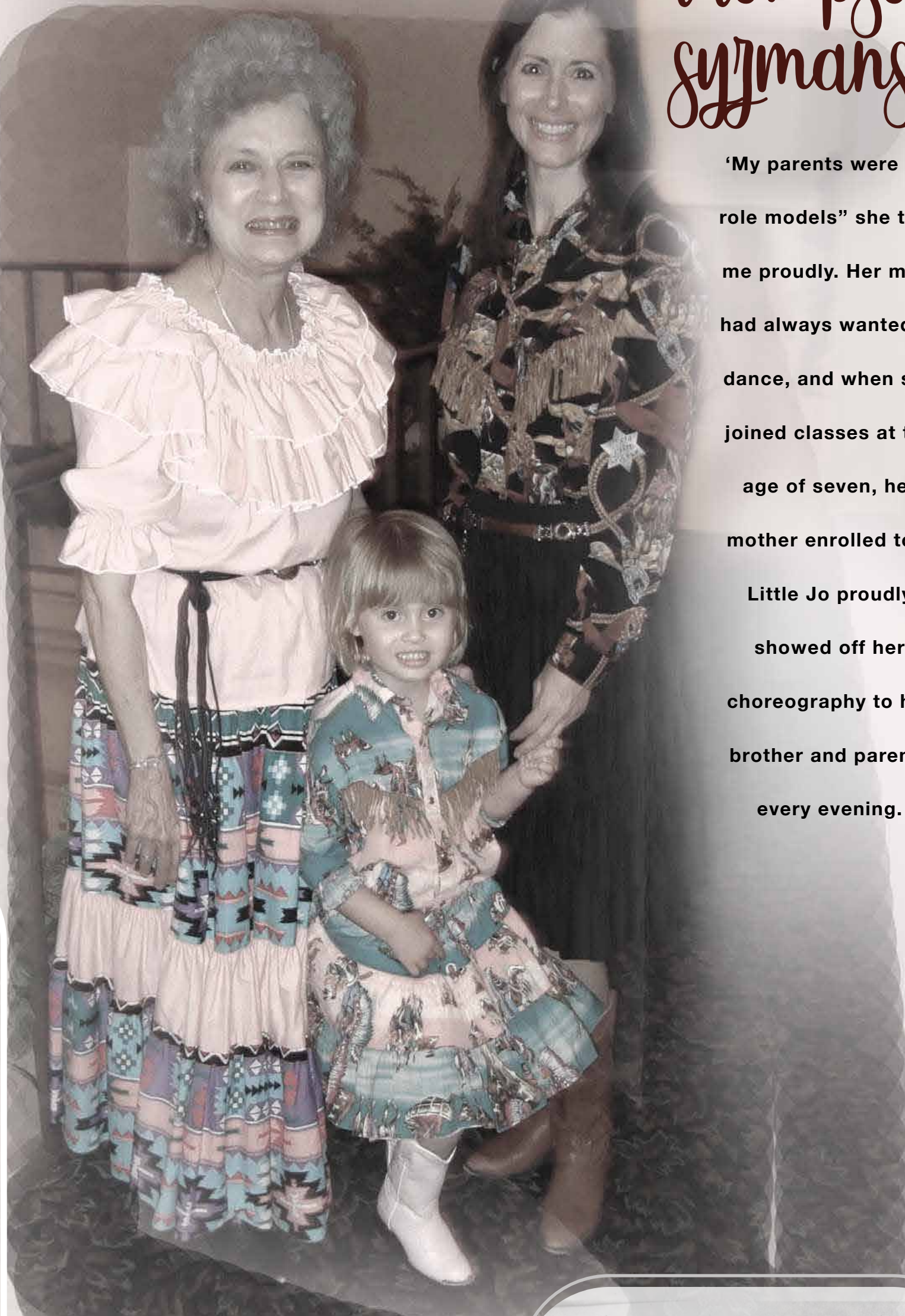
Segway to her young days and you see her parents driving out fire trucks, cleaning the driveway, teaching ballroom dances happily, to an eager group of dancers. I picture Jo returning from college at 9.30 in the evening to get into her dance routine as she sashays into Two-step and Line dance, Tap, and Ballet, and earns her pocket money to pay for college tuition. Students leave and the fire trucks are parked back. An enchanting, fairytale world.

I am in a movie and on the screen I see Jo's childhood home, in a suburban town, in eastern Texas. A fairytale has me wrapped and I cannot help being in awe of nature's art direction. Ballet, Jazz, Square, Two Step, Hip Hop, and Country dances are integral to their daily routine.

With the movie, Urban Cowboy, Country line dance gained popularity globally, and it had its biggest spike in Texas. The local college asked for Country dancing as part of the continued education program. A basketball gymnasium packed with 300 people participated in a dance routine conducted by her parents. They opened a studio when she was 15. It was about being in the right place at the right time, Joe reminisces.

Jo remembers her early lessons when a teacher told her that she should be true to the dance she was dancing. 'Do not try to look like a ballerina when you are tap dancing', she was advised. In line dance Jo follows the rule, and here it must need mindfulness.

Because of her understanding of different genres of music and dance, she loves learning from young instructors and admires the new trends. 'Country is close to my heart though', she says. You must know Islands of the Stream and Tush Push, and Dizzy if you are a line dancer. She has written all kinds of dances, the Cowboy Rhythm, Midnight Waltz, and Kick 'n' Jam which is half country and half funky. She believes that every Country has its classics and classics never go away. The new dances will come and go but the oldones are here to stay.



Jo Thompson Szymanski

'My parents were my role models' she tells me proudly. Her mom had always wanted to dance, and when she joined classes at the age of seven, her mother enrolled too. Little Jo proudly showed off her choreography to her brother and parents every evening.

When she sprinkles in technique, for her social Line dances, there is a reason for it. She explains that the body is designed to move in a certain way. Technique helps you to follow that pattern and aids the body in its movement. If you can keep that in the backdrop, dancing comes with ease. She retrained her body to walk normally after her hip replacement and she appreciates the need for it. She remembers that the only time her mother did not feel pain in her body was when she was dancing. Besides, students learn style and stance from us and the information shared by the instructor must be designed to create awareness. They can settle for their level of choice, and learn to work on footwork or core and framework accordingly.

Her husband often turned back from his WCS classes because dance was not his natural interest.

She understands if people have difficulties in grasping beat and rhythm. She would play Elvis Presley and enjoy dancing at an early age. Not everyone is like that. As an instructor you have to encourage an not intimidate.



Once upon a Time

DANCE WAS A NATURAL PROCESS

BY MONICA BHASIN

LD

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When she travels across time zones, it is her stamina from her ranch life as a child that helps her to give a hundred percent to her workshops. She works tirelessly without a break. 'I do not need rest, I focus on bringing value to the event', whether it is rehearsals or socialising, or preparation for workshops. She could have spent more time in appreciating and enjoying local flavours of the beautiful countries she has visited, and not just their hotels. She promises herself that luxury now.

Travel has been part of the same continuum since the time she started to teach at the age of 15, One such day when she was on Dance Nuline, and was at the Rodeo in Houston, her friend, and ex-Miss America, telephoned her for a favour. She wanted Jo to travel to her studio, pay for her own ticket to Dallas, for a clip of less than 60 seconds of Tush Push, in a TV show, soon after which came a long commercial break. What a waste, felt Jo, and understandably so. That video was viewed by many, though. People called asking for this girl with long hair and white boots. They wanted her and her workshops to be everywhere.

History does not repeat itself but it rhymes. Didn't the same happen with her parents? This 'super duper shy' girl participated in pageants and that gave her the opportunity to meet people. She was asked to host her own show on National Radio, Danceline. She pulled out an old manual with details of the radiocast as we chatted. With her name on many forums, she travelled nationally and internationally, and there was no time for shyness. Wait, the best is yet to come. In a country bar in Sacramento, California, a cute looking Air-Force officer asked her for a dance, not hard to guess who. And at that time he had had six months of WCS lessons. I love this story.



*Umbilical cord connection with dance ? Dance has been a natural process.*

'Good Luck', she encourages everyone to wish their neighbours in class. Just turning around and saying 'hello' builds a community of common interests.

I wonder if she knows how many instructors consider her their role model, when she talks about her role models from childhood. Her teachers always had time to chat and smile with students. She has fond memories of the comfortable space created by them. She idolised them. Jo, today you have us queuing up to emulate you.

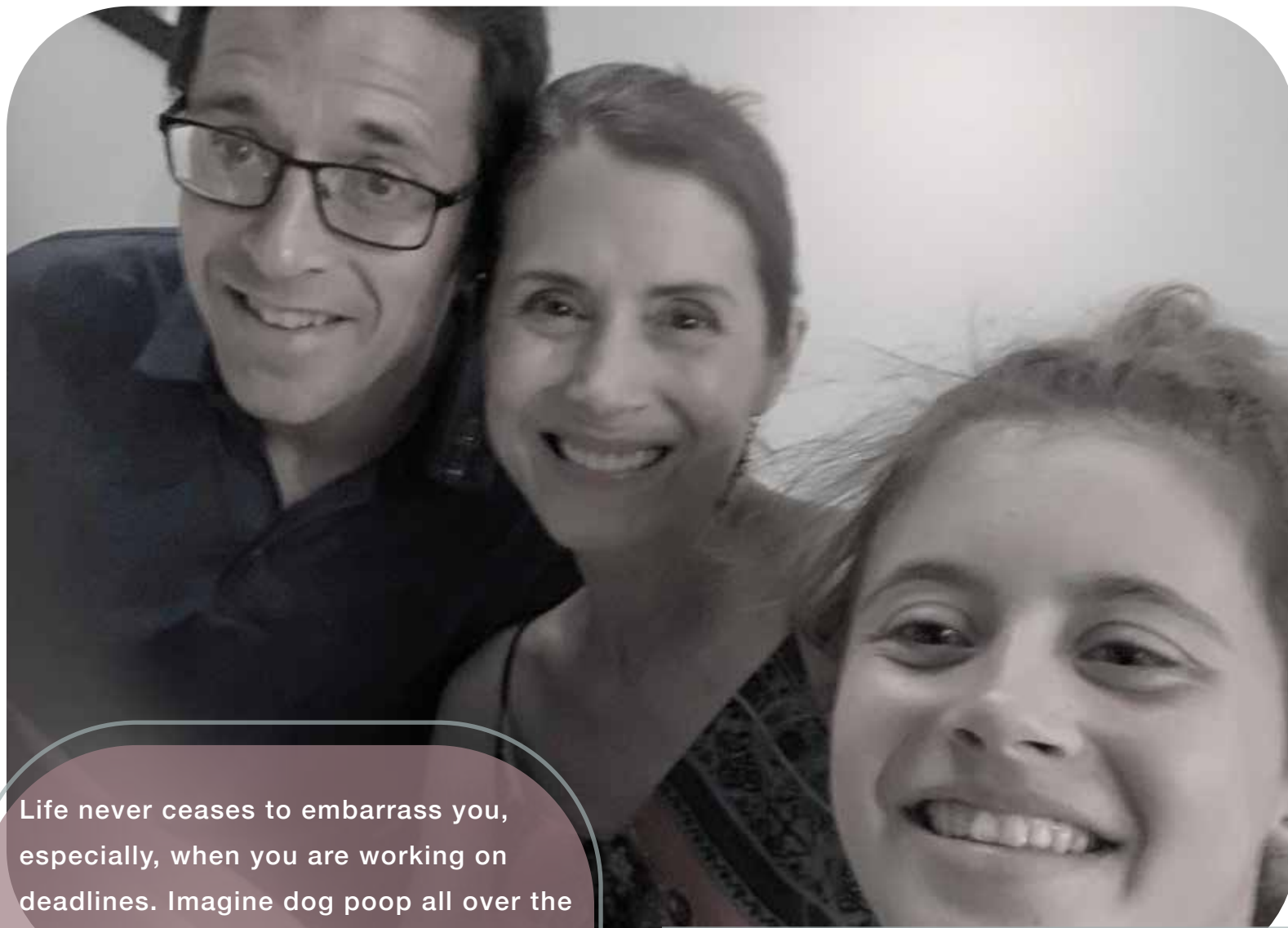
She tells me how important it was for her to engage with Max Perry's wealth of knowledge, and with Rachael in who she sees an extraordinary mirror for what she would want to do for the Line dance community, so committedly and selflessly.

In 2003 she decided to take a break from a hectic 48 weeks of travel per year. She and Tim planned to settle down. In 2005 she learnt that she was expecting Anna. Tim and she were overjoyed. With that came the doctor's diagnosis that she had aplastic anaemia which was a bone marrow disease- most unsettling when you know there is a life inside you that needs to be nourished. Here comes the most heartwarming part of that phase, the shining moment in her life. The line dance world came together to dance 'This little light' that she and her mother had choreographed to Scooter Lee's, "This little light of mine". Videos and photos came to her with messages. They sit cosily in a box she treasures. LDF in its early days sent one of their first recipients, financial aid. Her brother was there for medical support, and the dance community poured in their prayers and love. She felt blessed as she went through hip replacement, shoulder surgery and bone marrow treatment. She was emotional as she related her story, and I understood what made her so special.

'LDF is helping us to bridge the gap to be on the other side' says Joe, remembering the time when her illness kept her from work, and the LDF helped her financially and emotionally. We have to keep this Line dance community viable and growing and alive till we get past this difficult chapter. She says that **Betty, Steve, Helen, Alison and the entire team could not have chosen a better time. We all can make a difference. Reaching out is key.**

Cashews, walnuts, berries, nuts and green tea are her favourite foods in the morning. A cheat treat of dark chocolate in the evening is welcome. If she decides to visit us here in India, I will be well stocked. She is not a morning person while Tim is. He does his gym and biking in the morning and she takes care of Anna's schedule.

When she dances Rita's Waltz, a dance choreographed by Jo and her mother, she feels her dancing next to her. **Umbilical cord connection with dance?**



Life never ceases to embarrass you, especially, when you are working on deadlines. Imagine dog poop all over the floor when you are on camera and ready to begin your workshop. Anna and Tim were busy preparing Lulu, their little doggie, for the Legends in Line show and forgot to take her out for her morning walk. Anna, out of nervousness, must have squeezed her little doggie. Well the show must go on, and it did, in spite of the pooped up floor.

She completed 40 years of teaching and celebrated it with a fundraiser for breast cancer research. Her gratitude to the dance community came with bracelet favours and memories and photos of her family. She holds up a card for me to see. Beautiful memories of her brother and she, in cowboy hats and boots, she and her mother doing Rita's Waltz, and little Jo as Dorothy from the Wizard of Oz are printed on her 'Thank you' card. Another fundraiser for tornado victims of NashvilleTennessee was done to commemorate these 40 years. She has also partnered with Scooter Lee for an NGO called Dancing for the Dream.

Thanks for spelling out the health benefits of Line dance in these videos. You are talking to a beneficiary, Jo.

Jo explains how she can worry about a simple thing like our video chat. She inherits her need to be perfect from her mother. She must have revisited our conversation and some details were sent to me later by mail. You can tell she is a stickler for specifics. She also worries about how many people might have to change professions, post this virus outbreak. She herself has enough talent to tap on and could qualify for a costume designer, a music producer or a chef. She writes a gratefulness journal and is happy that she loves to travel and bike too, though hers is the lesser model, a mountain cruiser, and Tim and Anna have the better bikes.

We have the power to affect, interrupt the flow of words. I am glad I forgot to ask a few questions. My perception would have interfered.

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