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Fulfilling a Dream

Story by Zoe Olson, Aging Partners director of marketing and public relations

As children, we dream of what we will be and what we will do when we grow up—when we are older. Norma Klein accomplished many things as an adult, and her dream of learning to dance was fulfilled in retirement.

The year was 1989, and Klein had recently retired from government service.

“My friend, Roma Hoffman, and I were visiting on my front porch, sipping iced tea and trying to see what we could do to spend more time together now that we were both retired,” she said. “My neighbor girl, Heather, was practicing tap dance routines in her driveway.

“I asked Roma, ‘Did you dance when you were a girl?’ ‘No I didn’t.’ I didn’t either and I would love to dance. ‘I bet we could do that!’

“We asked Heather where she studied dance and she told us about Tracey Hart at her studio. Her old studio was in my neighborhood, so I walked on over and asked if she had tap dance classes for seniors. She didn’t but she was willing to start one and had just had another call inquiring about classes.

“She asked, ‘How many ladies will there be?’

“I laughed and admitted that we didn’t have any ladies, yet. She suggested six as a good number and so Roma and I started contacting friends and we formed the first class.”

Klein and Hoffman were joined by Arline Kraft, Darleen Gardner, Elaine Greb and Jean Dinges. Kraft had taken tap lessons as a child, but the other ladies put on tap shoes for the first time in September 1989.



Norma and Robert (“Speck”) Klein will celebrate their 70th wedding anniversary in January 2016. Photo by Zoe Olson.

“At the first class, Tracey was showing us some steps and we told her we didn’t want anything so intricate; we just wanted to learn a routine. One of our group said, ‘I don’t think my doctor will let me do that.’ Tracey recommended we all speak with our doctors before proceeding, and we did and we all passed,” Klein admitted with a laugh.

Hart taught the ladies to shuffle, step, toe tap, the Nifty, the flaps, ball change and the Shim Sham with its numerous variations. Klein’s inspiration and neighbor, Heather, would often help with practice and remembering the steps. Their first routine was set to Glen Miller’s “In the Mood.” Hart suggested the group come up with a name because they would be performing in the spring recital.

The Shim Shams dance troupe was born. According to Wikipedia,

the Shim Sham Shimmy is a particular tap dance routine and regarded as tap dance’s national anthem. Hart choreographs the group and includes this particular step, originated in the early 1900s, in every routine.

The first recital almost didn’t happen. Due to three health issues that came up the day of the event, Hart had to adjust the choreography for the three remaining dancers but, “We pulled it off and, oh my gosh! The audience just went crazy. Tracey’s husband was working the curtain at the recital and he came and got us for a bow because this is the first time anyone over the age of 5 has had a curtain call! We were so embarrassed, but so very pleased. We wanted to make sure it was good with the changes.

“The newspaper did a story about us and then everyone wanted us to perform for them. Tracey

was getting calls at the studio and so for quite a while, I'd schedule the performances. We only had one routine and people invariably wanted an encore!

"We performed for civic groups and small towns, and some of our best performances have been for veterans groups. Then people started wanting to pay us. We didn't want money but people would send it, so we started a scholarship fund for dancers who needed help with classes and costume expenses."

Over the years, the Shim Shams have entertained throughout Nebraska. From 1996 through 2010, the group danced twice a year at the Bob Devaney Sports Center, performing during halftime for both women's and men's basketball games. They have performed at the Nebraska State Fair, at Senior Centers, in Lincoln's Star City Holiday Parade, and in many festivals and parades throughout the state.

The group has always enjoyed dancing together; however, Klein

believes the best part of the group is the camaraderie that has formed. The members' husbands have always been supportive.

"They would accompany us to performances, occasionally performed with us, and they'd often stand in the back and whistle which would make other people whistle," Klein remembers with a twinkle in her eye. "I remember many of them had tears in their eyes at our first performance and they all walked up and brought us flowers. It was so sweet. They were always supportive."

In 1998, Klein's favorite performance of all time took place at the spring recital. Hart choreographed a routine to "All I Need Is A Girl," and the Shim Sham dancers' husbands and sons came to rehearsals, were fitted with tuxedos and really seemed to enjoy the experience.

"The men were dashing in their tuxedos, and we ladies felt so elegant in our ostrich-trimmed costumes. It was outstanding!"

Fun came with dancing, socializing, travel and costuming for the troupe. The dancers would purchase costumes from dance catalogs—some costumes were custom-made and some were made by the dancers themselves. Klein recalled a particular moment that made all the dancers laugh.

"Our costume director thought we should have garment bags to carry our costumes in when we traveled—it would look more professional," Klein explained. "When we arrived at the dance location and were getting ready, she started laughing. None of us knew what was so funny. Then she pointed out we all had garment bags covered with advertisements for hospitals and nursing homes."

The Shim Shams continue dancing today for organizations and events throughout Nebraska. Klein and her husband, Robert, AKA "Speck," still watch performances when they can. Dancers who are in their 50s

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Klein's favorite recital performance. Courtesy photo.

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join the troupe and according to Klein, everyone continues until “You’re out of steam.” Klein stopped dancing with the group at age 84.

“Dancing makes you more alert. It certainly improves your balance, and the rhythm of music made us more tolerable seniors,” she said with her hearty laugh.

Tune into Live & Learn’s May program on 5CITY-TV, where you will see the Shim Shams perform on this year’s “Lincoln Seniors Got Talent” in celebration of Older Americans Month.

Before becoming a Shim Sham, Klein worked for many years in the records bureau of the Lincoln Police Department. She enjoyed working with the detectives. Having reached the top of her classification within the city system, she decided to study court reporting and began taking night classes. While she hated to leave the police department, she wanted to broaden her professional skills and abilities, and saw court reporting as a way to advance her career.

During this time, the Nebraska Legislature had passed a law designating municipal courts



Courtesy photo


as Courts of Record within the state. The Municipal Court was on the second floor of the Police Department at the time, so Klein was familiar with the court clerk.

“He was interested in what I was studying, and he told me that the Municipal Court would be needing

court reporters, but that I wouldn’t need the stenography because the reporting would be accomplished by electronic recording,” she said.

Klein worked for the Municipal Court as a court reporter, “Which was an education in itself—interesting and fun.” She recorded and transcribed proceedings until Municipal Courts were merged with County Courts through legislative action. She applied for and was appointed Lancaster County court clerk, where she served until her retirement in January 1988.

Today, the Kleins live in their home in south Lincoln. High school sweethearts, the couple will celebrate their 70th wedding anniversary in January. They enjoy time together and with their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

“It was a good time.” Here’s to more good times ahead. 



Courtesy photo