

Anne A. Lawrence

by Charleigh Burns

As a dancer, sometimes it's difficult to find people to look up to and admire. In school, I've studied historical figures varied impacts upon our history, but what many have accomplished, through significant, often feels disconnected from my life. I don't feel as though many figures that I've learned about in school are champions. Typically, I don't relate to most public figures, nor do I view them as role models. For years I lived without someone to inspire me- until I heard about Anne A. Lawrence.

Anne A. Lawrence, born December 21, 1930, in Durham England, moved to Calgary in 1966 with her family, and resided there for nearly 50 years before she passed. Anne was a dance instructor who instituted three studios around Calgary: each titled the *Anne A. Lawrence School of Dancing*. She loved to teach and volunteer, utilizing her knowledge of dance to inspire others across the province to pursue their dreams. Mrs. Lawrence was always willing to lend a helping hand to anyone in need. I discovered this noteworthy Albertan from my local dance home away from home: *Expressions the Dance Gallery*. Anne Lawrence is forever treasured in my Strathmore based studio, as she was the inspiration for its founding. Anne Lawrence's daughter, Heather Thomas (Lawrence), was fortunate to grow up with such a role model, and in turn, she established a studio of her own, paying tribute to her mother's legacy.

Anne loved to volunteer and was generous with her time. She could be spotted offering dance classes for young children, square dancing with seniors, or even helping in the neighborhood. Friends and family boast about her profound love of dance, and especially of teaching children. Likewise, our dance studio established a program to better support the youngest dancers at our studio called STAR (Student Teacher Assistant Resources), which operates under the motto that 'together we can achieve more.' For the past two years, I've volunteered at least one hour a week to help instruct classes at my dance studio, assisting the assigned teacher in lesson planning, demonstrating skills, motivating, and correcting dancer's technique. Initially, I was so excited to be selected for this program, as it's an honor to be asked to help and because the youngest dancers are so cute, but I soon learned that teaching dance is more difficult than it might look. Often, the youngest students don't listen. More often than not, they would rather run around than learn the intricacies of a proper plie. I can imagine how Anne might have felt on her most difficult days of teaching dance, and through the STAR program, I've learned that teaching dance isn't actually about dance, it's about the child and forming human connection. Before, my goal was singularly focused on helping a child to improve her pirouette, whereas now, I realize that making her smile is a huge success. Instead of spending most of my time helping the child with the most potential, I've learned to value the progress of the struggling dancer, because *every child* deserves to feel valued. One of my most rewarding experiences this year happened on an evening when a mother informed me that her shy, reluctant to participate dancer, was likely going to sit out that evening as her grandmother had just passed and she was struggling with this news. I went out of my way to encourage her

participation, and to make her feel loved. Surprisingly, on this difficult day, she danced, she smiled, and she laughed - and I wouldn't have been happier had she executed the perfect pirouette! Through acts of volunteerism, like Lawrence, I have come to realize that dance is an avenue through reaching people, giving them needed human connection when life throws them obstacles.

Anne loved teaching children with special needs because it was important to her that *everyone* was given the opportunity to experience the joy of dance and of life. She was distraught by the fact that there were people who had been told that they couldn't dance, often due to medical conditions, and included provisions in her studio so that all could attend, which was not too common back in the 70's. Recently our dance studio established a scholarship in her name, the *Anne A Lawrence Memorial Award*, which is a monetary scholarship awarded annually to a student who works hard to overcome obstacles that (s)he may not have control of. It recognizes characteristics embodied by Anne: determination, work ethic, goal driven, warm hearted and accepting of others. In its inception, a student with Down Syndrome was awarded, and her joy shone across the stage as she was recognized. This really stood out to me because I have scoliosis, which means my spine is twisted and bent into an "s" shape. Due to this medical condition, I wear a back brace for twenty-one hours a day, attempting to prevent further progression. If I don't wear it as prescribed, I might have to undergo surgery- with metal rods- restricting mobility, which would drastically impact my flexibility and dancing ability. Wearing a brace is difficult for me, because I can't practice as much as the other girls, and there are certain skills that I can't execute properly due to hip misalignment;

however, it's encouraging to know that there was someone out there helping people like me, someone like Anne. It's encouraging for me to belong to a studio where being different, albeit limited, doesn't hold me back. Due to the mark imprinted by Lawrence, and others activating for the rights of others, many dance studios and sporting associations now promote equity, not equality, to help youth like me to succeed. I aspire to follow in Lawrence's footsteps: to continue to dance, teach dance, and to fight for those who are differently abled, so that they too can experience the joy that comes from doing what they love.

Not only was Lawrence's character defined by inclusion of students of varying ability, but she also recognized the fact that many Albertans were suffering from hard times, and she did all that she could to make her dance studio affordable. Before she was established, Anne often held handstand competitions in her basement with her children, inviting other neighbors to participate. And this is how her studio was founded—literally from the ground up. Anne opened her first studio in Calgary's NE community of Temple in 1967, in the basement of her home. Despite its humble basement beginnings, her studio flourished, expanding to over 400 students, and an over 30-year operation. Realizing that many dancers in her community couldn't afford class, she set her initial rates low, offering lessons for \$0.25 a class! Her generosity had a profound impact on me because she was not teaching for the money, but rather for her pure love of children. This year we had a family from both Guatemala and the Ukraine join our school. When they arrived, I was told that they literally came here with the clothes on their back and nothing else. Both times my parents encouraged me to clean out my

closet and to donate clothing, including coats and footwear to these families. Doing so was rewarding for me as I felt good to help those who had less than me. But as days went on, I noticed that *all* these students had to wear, was the clothing that we had donated. One orange hoodie that I typically donned monthly, was now combing through the halls every second day. It was such a humbling experience for me to realize that this small act of kindness, meant so much to these students. Like Anne, I realized that there is no greater joy, than that received through helping others.

Anne A. Lawrence was a champion, not in a typical way where she transformed our province through legislative or through political avenues, but in a more attainable way, by doing small things with great love, making a difference in the lives of many. Her passion for dance, and appreciation of the human spirit, shared joy with those around her. I honestly can't think of a better way to live, or a better way to make one's mark on the world, than by doing what you love, and loving those that you meet along the way. If we were all a little more giving, like Anne, then we would come to realize that joy doesn't come from material items, but instead, through relationships and being charitable to others. If we were all a little more accepting, like Anne, then fewer people would feel like they didn't belong, like they aren't part of their community and can't participate because they are different. If we were all a little more selfless, like Anne, our neighbors would not suffer without their basic needs being met. In learning more about the life of Anne A Lawrence, I am inspired to be a better person- inspired to be a champion.

Sources:

<https://mhfh.com/tribute/details/28086/Anne-LAWRENCE/obituary.html>

<https://www.expressionsthegallery.com/>

<https://www.legacy.com/obituaries/calgaryherald/obituary.aspx?n=annelawrence&pid=174947713&fhid=6135>

(I also interviewed Anne's mother, Heather Thomas, when completing this paper.)