

Elizabeth Polk - 99 Years Young

March 23, 1902 - October 29, 2001



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As an undergraduate dance major in the late 1960s, I had the good fortune of walking into a dance history class taught by Elizabeth Polk. Looking back now, I recognize that this meeting may well have changed the course of my life.

At that point in time I hadn't been particularly interested in dance history, nor had I heard about the little known field of dance therapy. However, I found myself strangely drawn to this weekly class. It was clearly Elizabeth who, with twinkles in her eyes, drew me in with captivating lectures about dance and its history and with passionate stories about "her children", those with whom she worked at Childville, a residential treatment center for emotionally disturbed children, the Lifeline Center for Child Development and the Lexington School for the Deaf.

Elizabeth's long and illustrious career in dance therapy included being a charter member of the ADTA and along with Liljan Espenak and other colleagues, she composed the first official definition for dance therapy. In 1995, at the age of 93, Elizabeth received a special lifetime achievement award at ADTA'S 30th Anniversary National Conference.

Closer to home, Elizabeth was a regular attendee at New York Chapter meetings. She served as the Chapter Treasurer from 1985-1987 and continued to work on the Board until 1989. Her interest in dance therapy and Chapter news and happenings never waned. As recently as two years ago Elizabeth was still traveling by subway into New York City to attend meetings.

In the earlier days of her career, Elizabeth referred to herself as a dance teacher with a specialty in teaching creative dance to children with a variety of disabling emotional and physical conditions. In fact, she was a dance therapy pioneer and her work with children came to be known as one of the standards for the ways in which dance therapists work with this population. Her 1974 article, entitled "Dance Therapy with Special Children", appeared in the highly regarded *Focus on Dance VII* and was the first publication in which this work was presented.

As her nephew Martin recalled in his obituary for his beloved aunt, Elizabeth "exhibited an unusual ability to stir each child to move creatively to music, often with the use of such props as balloons and hoops. She had a deep respect for each child's individuality of expression and her compassion, enthusiasm and joy encouraged even the most frightened or anxious children to relax and move more freely."

She held such an enduring passion for working with children that she taught until her 89th year. She retired only because, as her daughter Grace recalled, "it became too difficult for her to carry the equipment from room to room." She was, however, delighted to learn that her employer thought her to be 19 years younger than her almost nine decades.

With a background in music, Dalcroze eurythmics, ballet and modern dance, Elizabeth first began teaching creative dance to children in her native Austria, where she also received a physical education license, a prerequisite for teaching dance. However, her work in Vienna was cut short by the war. It wasn't until 1941, three years after she and her husband immigrated to the United States, that she resumed her teaching career with children.

Elizabeth offered classes in the basement studio in her home in Queens, where she used the "child's natural love of rhythm", providing just the outlet that was needed to channel the children's "energy, creativity and artistic abilities." (Anne Mitcheltree). Soon after she started these classes Elizabeth began teaching the mothers of her students. They too wanted to participate in the powerful dance experiences that were responsible for freeing the spirits of their children.

Out of Elizabeth's work with children came her very popular and widely distributed musical records: "Orchestrated Music for Special Children" and "Wake-Up, Calm-Down" (Vol. 1 & 2). Further recognition led her to help shape the curriculum in New York City Schools and she developed teaching modules for gymnastic, physical education and music teachers.

Throughout her career Elizabeth lectured on physical education, dance and dance therapy. She presented at conferences, seminars and workshops in Germany, France and Mexico, and in the States at Columbia University, Adelphi University, Fordham University, Brigham Young University, Peabody Conservatory of Music, New York University and Hunter College, to name a few. She also joined the faculty of the Children's Center for Creative Arts at Adelphi University, where for many years she taught the much sought after Saturday morning dance classes for children.

Elizabeth had an incredibly refreshing and positive outlook on life. For her, the glass was always full. She drew strength from her Christian Science faith and with incredible fortitude she always looked forward and squarely took on all that life handed to her. She loved her work, her friends, her students and most of all her daughter Grace, to whom we send condolences. With the same passion in which it was given, we all loved her back.

Five years ago Elizabeth helped to found Timelines, a non-profit organization created to promote the wisdom and creativity of elders. She participated in a weekly writing workshop in which she wrote the following, a testimony to her outlook on life and to her enduring spirit:

"I am considered an old woman—at least to a stranger looking at me. I can't believe it. I don't feel old. What is "old?" If I can't laugh, heartily laugh, and enjoy little things, that must be "old" behavior.

I look at the fresh fallen, fluffy, soft, white snow and I want to touch it, taste it, put my face into it. I want to throw snowballs – a big one at the next passerby! Is this proper behavior for an old woman.

Can I cry? Yes, but I don't waste my life on trivia. Crying is for broken hearts. But I am young. There is so much joy in watching a young mother nursing her baby, watching stars come out and turning a dark sky into a shiny Christmas tree. Watching children running home from school, bursting with energy, throw-

ing their schoolbags at one another. Telling them to stop is for old ladies. I watch and laugh. This is life. Dear God, keep me alive – not just living, and I shall never feel old."

Grace Polk has suggested that anyone wanting to make a donation in Elizabeth's memory might consider donating to Timelines Community, Inc. Contributions can be sent to:

Timelines Community Inc.
370 West 11th Street
New York, N.Y. 10014

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Nana Koch has also had several articles published in ADTA journals. She teaches the work of Liljan Espenak in courses presented in New York and in Japan and Costa Rica. We thank Nana for kindly giving her permission for this article to be reprinted in the Dance Therapy Association of Australia newsletter.