

# CELEBRATING DENISE HEENAN AND HER MILESTONE BIRTHDAY

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Living all but nine years in the San Jose, California area, Denise Heenan, a fixture in the Bay Area dance scene, is celebrating her 80th birthday (which many people refuse to believe!). We decided we wanted to know more about her.

Born in San Jose as the second of five children, Denise danced from an early age, starting ballet at seven. Growing up, she took many dance classes and was always looking for more opportunities to dance.

She first participated in folk dance at San Jose State University where she was earning a teaching credential to go with her degree in home economics. At that time, Ned and Marian Gault were teaching two classes on campus, and Denise became a regular attendee. In fall of 1968, Denise signed up for additional dance classes, joined the Mexican performance group Los Lupeños, and saw a life-changing advertisement for the annual Stockton Folk Dance Camp. All this occurred after her divorce from Jim, her high school sweetheart and father of her son, Chris.



In 1969, Denise first attended Stockton Folk Dance Camp. She remembers that, during her first year, in addition to learning all she could, she was determined to learn the Hambo from Madelynne Green.

In 1971, Denise married Bruce Mitchell, future director of Stockton Folk Dance Camp, and moved to Sacramento. While living in Sacramento, Denise assisted Bruce with dance classes and events and, as part of the Sacramento-based performing group Camtia, performed throughout the state at festivals.

Camtia performed at the 1974 World Expo in Spokane, Washington, along with the children of the troupe members. Her son has never forgiven her for making him wear women's knee high socks as part of his costume. Lederhosen, constructed by mothers in the group, were also part of the boys' costumes.

Moving back to San Jose in 1980, Denise returned to college, adding kitchen design courses and certifications to her resumé, which led to positions at multiple design and construction firms.

Denise resumed folk dancing via Scottish Country Dancing and earned the very difficult RSCDS Teaching Certificate. As have others who have earned the certificate, Denise described it as being harder than any college course, with multiple written exams and live exams by instructors from Scotland. After completion, Denise began teaching the San Jose Scottish dance class.

Getting back into international folk dance, Denise first joined the Santa Clara Valley Folk Dancers, meeting many people who have become lifelong friends. In addition to weekly classes and monthly parties, she again attended Friday night folk dancing at San Jose State. In 1982, Denise began teaching the Santa Clara team, partnering with Ken Yates and Christa Werling.

In the mid-1990s, Ruth Ruling invited Denise to join the Palomanians (See *Let's Dance!*, November issue, p. 7) as an assistant teacher to Ruth, and Denise gradually introduced recreational folk dancing to the Palomanians. Given the group's dance repertoire, her experience in Scottish Country Dance also

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## **Denise Heenan** – *continued*

served her well. As time passed, Denise took over the primary responsibilities of the group.

Denise has been the primary Palomanians teacher for more than a decade, recruiting new dancers to folk dancing, encouraging class members to teach, balancing her great pre-fixe programs with dancers' requests, and being one of the major drivers behind the growth of the Palomanians group. When developing a program, Denise favors dances that balance new and classic, partner and non-partner, easy and challenging, various nationalities, along with mixers and some of her personal favorites. In general, she dislikes seeing people sit out for more than a few dances and she reads a room exceptionally well.

In addition, Denise teaches at local festivals and parties and attends many other events and classes. In 2019, she was the first honoree during the Candle Lighting Ceremony at Stockton for her work and dedication to Stockton as a long-term camper (50 years), a former member of the Board, and five years of organizing the live Scholarship Auction.

When dancers were asked about Denise, the most common phrases heard were "marvelous dancer," "gregarious personality," "terrific friend," "light-hearted and focused," and "infectiously funny."

When asked about teachers and dancers who have influenced her, Denise thought of many, many master teachers, among them Atanas Kolarovski's spirit, Yves Moreau's humor and breakdown of steps, Marianne Taylor's thoroughness, Bruce Mitchell's organizational skills, Johnny Pappas' authenticity, and Sonia Dion and Cristian Florescu's light-hearted teaching style. One of the things Denise learned from Edith Thompson was that "You always want people to wish the party hadn't ended as opposed to wishing it would."



**On December 7, Bay Area dancers will celebrate Denise's 80th birthday at the annual Palomanians Pie Party, joined by dancers from across the United States and Canada, as well as her family. All**

**are invited! Watch for pictures from Denise's party, as well as other year-end events in next month's issue.**