

One More Time: A Tribute Podcast to My Mom

Act One

By: Meghan Bowman

Meghan: When something happens, life doesn't stop. But for me, time stood still Friday, August 25th, 2023. That's the date Pastor Brian Hutchinson officiated my mom's funeral.

Pastor Brian Hutchinson: Well, we're here to honor Gloria today. The Lord was gracious and gave her 67 years upon this earth to be such a great blessing to her family and to many others.

Meghan: He never met my mom, only saw pictures of her and heard how my dad had described her. But that's one thing I can't stand about services like this. Good intentions are always there, but it can come off disingenuous when they talk about someone they've never met. But Pastor Brian, he got it. He understood the assignment. And I think in this instance, he nailed it.

Pastor Brian Hutchinson: Her passion was in dancing. In 1978, Gloria opened the Gloria Jean's School of Dance. And she didn't do this for gain, for profit, or anything for herself. She did this to be able to have her passion for what she loved be contagious to others around her. Gloria made an impact and changed lives.

Meghan: Gloria Jean's School of Dance, the studio I grew up in. A place I and many others called home for 20 years. Where family vacations always seemed to coincide with a dance competition. Gloria Jean Gil was my mom. She never treated it like work, but she also didn't treat it like a hobby -- it was a way of life. The studio was a place where she taught more than dance. We learned important values about ourselves and other people. Like the importance of preparation, that there's always time for one more time, that nothing great can happen if you don't practice, And most importantly, you can do absolutely anything you set your mind to.

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Welcome to one more time a tribute to my mom. This is a three-part podcast dedicated to the life of Gloria Jean Gil. She was a dancer, wife, daughter, choreographer, adjudicator, and business owner. For two decades, she ran a dance studio in St. Petersburg, Florida, that counts hundreds, if not thousands, of students who came through her doors. But above all, she is my mom. This is her story and the story of the lives she touched. I'm Meghan Bowman. And this is Act One.

Amy Ardelean works at Disney theme parks in the casting department. She was a student of Gloria Jeans's.

Amy Ardelean: I think we need more of Gloria in our everyday world because I think you learn valuable lessons. But for her, she used to say, you know, feedback is a gift. Because if you're not getting notes from me, it means that I don't care enough to look at you anymore. Now, I think I was like 12 when she said that, which is the part where people go, but you know what? It's true. It's true.

Meghan: First and foremost, we were a tap studio. Other genres were taught and done well, but our strength was tap dance. There were five or six other dance studios that were our so-called competition in town, and I won't say we were the best, but from 1980 to 2000. If we went to a dance competition, we brought home most of the trophies. It was really exciting because tap notoriously doesn't win at competitions. It usually goes to ballet or jazz dances. The thing is, in tap dance, you have to look great and sound great. That is what sets it apart.

Years ago, when the studio began, *So You Think You Can Dance* and *Dance Moms* didn't exist. Yes, dance was popular in the 80s and 90s, but the dance studio industry has grown into something much larger than it was then. For context, [studio director](#) lists over 65,000 dance studios in the United States. Guess how many Starbucks there are? Just over 36,000 globally.

On one side, the growth has been tremendous. Dance has consistently gained popularity -- even with the scandals. National ballet companies have been torn apart from horrible accounts of abuse and assault, but more and more kids sign up for ballet classes every year. But it didn't matter how many other studios were in town. Gloria Jean just wanted to teach, create, and inspire. Dance was always her life. She loved it. There was no other, no in-between, and no delineation from it. She was the typical cliché -- eat, sleep, and breathe dance. And she really was something spectacular.

Gloria's first gig was in Vegas when she was about 17. Unfortunately, she never shared any of the juicy stories with me about her time there. And trust me, I asked often. But she did dance with some of the greatest tap dancers in the last century -- the Nicholas Brothers and Donald O'Connor.

Donald O'Connor was actually known for this trick where he'd run up a wall and flip backward off of it. Mom told me when she worked with him, he tried to teach her how to do it, but they'd usually end up in fits of laughter and her failed attempts. Donald gave my mom a signed black and white photograph with a small handwritten message: "To Gloria, you're wonderful, Donald O'Connor '74."

That picture hangs on my office wall, behind my desk.

There are so many wonderful memories I have from the dance studio. Stories I've heard and people I've met. Gloria Jean inspired many things in my own life. But one of the greatest things the studio did was bring my parents together. Without it, I wouldn't be here telling you the story. She and my dad met thanks to her very first dance recital in 1979. The story goes my dad's neighbor, Mario, had a daughter who was best friends with my oldest sister Shannon, a product of dad's first marriage. His neighbor says to sign my sister up for dance lessons at a new studio in the neighborhood. And as the first dance recital approached, my mom asked Mario if he knew anyone was stereo recording equipment. I'll let my dad, Michael Gill, take it from here.

Michael Gill: Gloria asked me if I would record music for her first show. Yeah, like I was going to say no to that. For three or four Fridays in a row. We recorded the music for her dance recital on my reel-to-reel tape player. I thought we were playing a cat-and-mouse game during those recording sessions. I remember one night, I walked her out to her car and she leaned against her car -- I wanted to lean over and kiss her. But I was too crazy I didn't do it.

It was only later, when we would talk about it, she wondered why I didn't lean over and kiss her that night. I kept waiting for the right time, but I was too stupid to realize that was the right time.

Sometimes when we'd talk about how we met, she would also ask me, why didn't you ask me out while we were recording the show? She would say, I kept waiting

every Friday night we were done recording the music. That failure almost cost the woman and the life that I love.

I was falling for Gloria when we taped that music. I was falling for Gloria the night after her first recital. I realized only after a few days that I wanted to be with her for the rest of my life.

Meghan: We were a blended family. My sister Shannon and brother Tracy, both from my dad's first marriage, and my sister Christi was from my mom's first marriage. And when they finally got married, my mom was young.

Shannon: Twenty-three years old. That's when she switched from being Miss Gloria to mom. Imagine that, just twenty-three, I'm double that plus now. At the time I was over seven. So I've heard it said we can choose our friends but we can't choose our family. Well for us, that's just not true. I can boldly and truthfully say my mom chose me. She was my dance teacher for a year before she married my daddy. She absolutely knew what a handful I was. And she still chose knowing that. That it was ok to bring our family together.

Meghan: Shannon says some of her most vivid memories are when mom and dad got together. She says mom changed her life when she said yes to my dad. After only three weeks of dating. July 14th, 1979, they were married. Only three weeks and they knew. She used to joke that everyone thought they got married because she was pregnant. But I wasn't born until five years after the nuptials. Mom always said I must have been the longest pregnancy ever recorded.

But that's who she was. She found humor in the things that most people wouldn't. If she wanted something, she went out and she got it. She had a spirit and a tenacity that made you want to work hard for her, to be better. You'd keep trying because you wanted her approval. Her love for dance spilled into others, but taught all of us so much about life. Tiffany Snyder, a student who danced for years with Gloria Jean came to her funeral.

Tiffany Snyder: She did not suffer fools. And she did not give compliments when they weren't true. So, when she put that beautiful face up to yours, and told you you had done good, you knew that it was true. She taught us to overcome. She never let us give up on ourselves. Others have said it, but imagine saying these words: I can't! Gloria gave us a space to create beauty, to learn, to struggle, to flourish, and to

conquer. Because of the incredible amounts of effort and time Gloria expected of us, I faced other events in my life with courage and perspective. I knew that I could do hard things, because I already had. Thanks to Gloria.

Meghan: In recent years, reports have shown the benefits that dance has on people. One study in the [National Library of Medicine](#) found dance classes can help adolescents sleep better at night and alleviate depressive symptoms like depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive disorder. It can also increase memory capacity and improve convergent thinking.

Dancing can also increase overall medical health and wellness for children and adolescents. Especially in an era where most kids would rather sit at a computer, on a cell phone, or in front of an X-Box.

The study says, "Children express their creativity and emotions such as joy, fun, and happiness in the process of practicing and participating in dance which provides children with body awareness, enthusiasm, and confidence."

In English? Children express themselves through dance, and by doing so learn about their bodies and grow more confident.

The study's findings come after years of research, but my mom already knew all that because it was in her blood. Like I said, dance was a way of life for her. Tiffany shared a story at the funeral about uttering the words, "I can't" in front of Gloria Jean. And it was a story we heard multiple times. Because saying those two words was not allowed in her presence anywhere or at any time. And Tiffany, like so many others, became like a second family to me. Mom had four kids, my siblings, but we weren't her only children. Every person who took lessons from her eventually became like one of her own, and she treated them as such.

In fact, for a few years, a dancer named Colleen came to live with our family. She danced with Gloria Jean for a few years. And at 16, she tried to go home after dance one night, and there was a lot of domestic trouble at her house. Colleen called my mom crying. Mama told her to come to our house. She ended up living with us until she was 18.

Gloria Jean loved her dance kids the same as her actual kids. But that also meant she had the same expectations of them, and sometimes that was hard. Sometimes they let her down. And I heard her say on many occasions, a dance kid had broken

her heart. And sometimes I let her down. She even told me once that I broke her heart. But most times, I didn't want to share her with anyone else.

I'm what you would call a studio rat, a little kid who spends all their time in a dance studio. Mom would pick me up from school and we'd head straight there. I'd sit in the backseat and change out of my school clothes and tights in a leotard, which let me go on the record to say, I despised even in my professional career. I never wore tights if I didn't have to.

Anyway, after my classes, I'd always do my homework while I waited for my dad to pick me up. She would keep teaching Monday through Friday, all night, and Saturday mornings. One of my parent's favorite stories to rehash was when I was in elementary school, and a teacher asked what our parents did. I think it might have been in kindergarten. To be honest, I never understood what my dad did for a living. So I usually just said that you worked in computers. But for my mom, I told the teacher the truth. I said, "My mom dances late every night. She always gets home after I go to bed."

Technically, that was all true. But context is also an important thing. Imagine what the teacher thought I meant. She always swore up and down. She never danced topless, even when she was in Vegas, although according to her, she was asked more than once. She'd always tell people, "I am a dancer, not a showgirl."

I'd be at the studio for hours every single day. Dad would usually pick me up a few hours after he got off work. But I rarely wanted to leave. I always wanted to stay for the big kid classes. I thought I was so cool because I was her daughter. In fact, if people asked me my name, I'd always say, "I'm Gloria Jean's daughter, Meghan."

Staying after class and running through the studio was always fun for me, especially when I found my way into the costume room. Orange feathered boas, sequined dresses, bright yellow chaps with fringe, green and blue crushed velvet dresses.

But during class, I was not quite as excited. I come from an era where parents spank their kids, if they acted up, it was never abuse. And I don't look back on it with animosity. If anything it makes me laugh a little bit. It happened to me a lot at the studio, my attitude would get me into trouble. Especially when I was four or five when I'd start getting too big for my britches in class, as my mom would say. She'd give me a warning.

“Meghan, if you don't stop it, I am going to take you to the bathroom.”

Everyone knew, including me what happened in the bathroom. It was kind of like a timeout corner. She never embarrassed me in front of the class. But she'd yank me by the hand and take me to the bathroom, and either yell at me, tell me she was going to tell my dad, or in some cases, when I was really being a terror, she'd smack my bottom. That bathroom anecdote at the funeral brought quite a few laughs because everyone knew what happened there.

Amy remembers the bathroom stories, too.

Amy Ardelean: I remember her once telling me, “Meghan goes to school. And she is an angel. Everyone talks about how she is an angel. And then she gets home, and she doesn't listen to a thing that I said. And she acts out.”

Probably because you've been good all day. And I think for her, who believes so much in just discipline and respect, that especially at the dance studio, where you were just a kid, you needed to be the role model. And so if you weren't, off to the bathroom you went, right.

I mean, it's a real thing, you know that. And it would just, there would even be a warning. Like Meghan, if you don't stop, we're going into the bathroom. It's a core memory for me. Because, I was older than you and I would watch this happen. But what's funny, is that as an adult, you move through life and I think there are a couple of things – you could become embarrassed, you could have a boss deliver bad news, or you can have a situation where you're frustrated with someone, right? And you need a time out. I think that there was an element of I'm going to use the phrase “just don't show your ass,” right?

And really as funny as this story is about you going to the bathroom, there's an actual truth in there, around the idea of whether it was cockiness or over-excitement. Or when you become an adult if you want to tell somebody off or you're upset about this, or you got bad feedback or you're embarrassed about something, don't let that be on display. Go give yourself a timeout.

Meghan: What she taught was so much more than dance. Yes, Gloria Jean did what she loved every day. And yes, that love created a passion for dance in me and others. But she taught us real-world values, things that all of us would take far beyond the dance studio and well into our professional lives. She taught us to be

prepared because she did not repeat herself. If you missed a class or came in behind, you'd better learn it outside, jump in the back and pick it up, or just not come at all.

It may sound harsh, but the real world is tough. No corporation really cares if you're sad or behind. They hired you to do a job. So do it. Gloria Jean taught candor. She did not mince words, she told it how it was. Some today might call that harsh. But she did it in a way that made us want to be better. People say dance is an extracurricular activity and for many, it is. The tough-love attitude of dance training Gloria Jean used has changed quite a bit from when she taught. Today, she'd probably be canceled. But back then, it was appreciated. Because not everyone got a trophy like dancers do today.

Amy Ardelean: My favorite thing, my thing that she used to say that I brought up is, “save your tears for your pillow.”

Again, I was very young. I needed to hear that though, because I was really shy and sensitive. We talked about meeting people where they were – your mom, for me she did a really nice job of balancing direct feedback, but also knowing I was really hard on myself. So there was a lot of confidence boosting. A lot more of that than the other.

Meghan: Every Gloria Jean dancer knew it was something special when we went to competition and came home with all those trophies, because that meant we really won. There was first place, second place, third place, and the dreaded honorable mention. In today's dance world, there are classes of dancers at competition: beginner or novice, intermediate, and advanced, sometimes also called elite. And the award system is bizarre.

I've judged for a national dance competition for a few years and they purposely did not give out low scores or the lowest award title because they didn't want to upset studio owners, parents, or students. They had bronze, high bronze, silver, high silver, gold, platinum, and platinum plus.

The year after I left they added another level above platinum plus called diamond. The lowest we were allowed to give out was high silver. To me that completely defeats the purpose of competing. I'd always question the stage managers – if these

dancers don't score terribly once or twice when they really blow it, how else will they learn that you need to put more work in? But I always got overruled.

But whether you're from the old school dance world, like my mom, or the new contemporary school of dance, the values this art form teaches dancers outside the studio, well, I don't know if you can get that anywhere else.

After the funeral, we held a celebration of life with people I hadn't talked to in over 20 years. Perfect Jenny was there. Her actual name is Jenny Geiger. In reality, Jenny is actually the sweetest, most demure person you'd ever meet. But my siblings and I always called her that because we'd constantly be compared to her. And the way she could make sense of my mom's dance notes and learn a dance in one night. While we couldn't.

As the services were winding down, and everyone kept sharing their favorite Gloria Jean stories, Jenny and I got to talking about how great it would be to set up a tribute tap class. One more time for all of my mom's kids to get back together and celebrate her.

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The One More Time Podcast would not exist without the help of a few individuals: Thank you to my husband and family for your support in making this happen. Sending a big thank you to Wayne Garcia, my professor, editor, and personal cheerleader who helped me put this whole thing together and helped me realize this wasn't something I should do, but something I needed to do. Thank you to Ben Consigli, without whom my podcast would be completely soundless. He took an idea and ran with it.

All writing and producing was done by yours truly, Meghan Bowman.