

# One More Time: A Tribute Podcast to My Mom

## Act Two

By: Meghan Bowman

**Meghan:** My mom died on a Thursday night. My sister Christi was driving in from Texas and was only 10 hours away. Once the nurse called the time of death, she asked us to leave the room to prepare her for the funeral home. So we all moved to the living room and had vodka cranberries. At least that's what I had. I don't know what they had, but I know we all had a drink. We just sat there in silence. We were in shock.

Then we waited for an hour for the funeral home to pick her up. It felt like so much longer. Every time I walked by the bedroom and saw her lying there. It was like she was sleeping. It wasn't until the funeral home staff brought a stretcher inside and wheeled her out. After our goodbyes, they covered her face with the top of a black body bag and I finally crumbled.

The next morning, my husband and I headed back to Tampa, we drove in separate cars. I listened to a true crime podcast. For some reason, people dying there took my mind off the fact that my mom had just died. I couldn't listen to music, a usual favorite of mine. Have you ever realized how many songs talk about mothers? An ungodly amount. Once we got home, we had to share the news with my kids. I didn't share what I told you, but I did tell them in one week's time we'd be burying her.

My six-year-old Oliver had the sweetest response. One of those moments where you can see death through a child's eyes and it somehow makes it okay.

Last year we lost our 17-year-old dog Jaxx. He was as much a part of the family as any human is. My parents even loved the dog. Oliver looked up at me and it was like a light bulb went off above his head. He said, "It's okay Mom. Grandma can take Jaxx outside now. They'll be together!"

I laughed, cried and I just hugged him because it's true. Now she and Jaxx can hang out.

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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 Two.

I've danced my whole life. But I've always been known as the writer of the family. Mom used to share my stories and tell everyone how amazing she thought I was. She always said I should write a book. Maybe one day I will.

So my family tasked me with writing the obituary and making a video of my mom's life for the funeral home to play during the services.

I went through 20 years of recitals.

Pulling videos of her dancing and her favorite numbers, over 250 photos. I even added some of my mom's favorite songs. I also pulled my very first competition dance.

Mom thought for the longest time I just didn't get the dance gene. When I was about six (years old), we went to Hoctor's Dance Competition. I remember seeing the size of the trophies when we walked in. The first-place trophy was taller than I was. I looked up at my mom and said, "I want that one."

I remember her looking down and saying, "oh baby, you're probably not going to get that one."

Until that point, my duet partner, the other Megan. and I would bump into each other on each run-through. We were a hot mess to put it lightly. My mom really thought there was no hope. But when we went on stage and they said our names

“Meghan and Megan, performing Yellow Rose of Texas,” we just looked at each other and smiled. No one had ever introduced us like that at the dance studio. All of a sudden, everything clicked.

That was the day I decided I want to be a dancer when I grow up.

Megan and I got that first-place trophy that day too. I've always excelled when I was underestimated. It's like a fire is lit inside me to prove them wrong. That first dance competition was just the beginning.

Gloria Jean started dancing when she was around 10. She wasn't that good at first. My grandma said after her very first class at Jean Lynn's Dance School. She came home and cried because she was so bad. After that first class, Gloria Jean practiced every day the following week for hours. She was determined, Grandma said she went back to her second class as one of the best.

At 17 she auditioned for a nightclub act starring Donald O'Connor and was hired as a dancer. The show first went through Little Rock, Arkansas, and eventually ended up in Las Vegas. She said the producers and casting people thought she was a terrible singer. So bad, in fact, they'd never mic her during the shows. But her dancing abilities got her that gig.

Back then you had to be 18 to legally be allowed to perform in Vegas. She said for her first few months there. She had to have a fake sheriff's card, or a fake ID, in order to get into the building to perform. She only stayed there for about a year and then she came back home. Her reasons have always been somewhat unclear. She said once it was because she gambled all her money away. And another time, she said she was homesick. I do know she was back at 19 and got her cosmetology license and opened the studio. She got married not soon after that and had my sister Christi.

**Christi Clark:** She touched so many people's lives through dance, and I know she is now dancing in the sky and her body is healed. And that I will one day see her again. She would always do without to ensure that us kids always had everything that we needed and wanted.

**Meghan:** Christi is right. Mom always made sure we had whatever we needed. She and my dad would do whatever they had to to make sure we were happy. At one

point Dad even worked four jobs to make sure my sister Shannon could get a prom dress.

One Christmas, Mom stood in line for hours to get me a Teddy Ruxpin doll. They always went above and beyond. That's why when I started working on her video and obituary, I knew I had to do the same. I got to work on it right after she died.

For one thing, it kept me occupied. But mostly it helped keep my mind off reality. I just wanted her final send-off to be as amazing as she is. As she was.

Gloria Jean's School of Dance was a family affair. We were all involved. And everyone, except my dad, danced. I ended up dancing professionally for a while and then eventually opened up my own dance studio. I even had a pair of my own magic tap shoes just like she did. The studio is still one of the few places I am most confident and can completely command a room. I'm a lot like my mom in that way.

I remember calling her crying from my studio's very first dance competition in Houston. I thought my choreography was terrible. And everyone was so much better than we were. I was actually embarrassed for them.

I had four kids – they had been dancing together for a year. Mom just said, “It's okay honey. You just started out. Not every show is going to be great.”

But I didn't know how not to be the best. Gloria Jean's was always on top. She just made it look so easy. But it wasn't. For one thing, parents trusted her, students wanted to work hard for her.

Today, Dance Moms are ruining the art form by living vicariously through their children. I've gotten phone calls because a child was not in the front row, or because they thought their child was the best and should be in an upper level. Nine times out of ten they weren't. I got calls telling me how to do my job when they've never even stepped into a dance room before in their life. They never understood what sacrifice is. I missed my homecoming dance in high school because I had a dance competition.

My sister Christi taught tap for a few years and eventually moved on from teaching. My brother Tracy went into the Navy. But he did take his tap shoes with him. My sister Shannon taught tap and clogging on and off throughout the years. When Dad

shared the news about Mom getting really sick on the Gloria Jean's School of Dance Facebook page. So many people shared memories...

**Susan Giles Wantuck:** A Facebook message from Alexis Marie...

“Gloria was, is a force. An incredibly positive force in my life for almost 12 years. from 6 years old to 18 (years old). And all these years after that I have carried her guidance, education, and memories of Gloria Jean's School of Dance with me. She took a socially awkward, unruly but shy little kid and taught me how to be part of a greater group, that there's absolutely no such thing as “I can't,” and to always persevere. When I didn't have anyone to get me to class. She happily piled me in the van. She's had a huge impact on my life and who I am today. And I think of those years often.”

**Meghan:** All of them writing unsurprisingly, similar things.

**Susan Giles Wantuck:** A Facebook message from Diane Partelo...

“My dad passed away unexpectedly the summer before my senior year in high school (1991). At that point, I'd been with a studio for a year. Gloria was so loving and so incredibly caring. Listened to me talk when not many adults would. I will never forget the talk we had during my last recital. I still have the necklace charm she gave me that night. It honestly meant so much and I doubt she even knew that at the time.”

A Facebook message from Amanda Cappellini...

“It was because of your glorious generous heart that I was given the opportunity to do what I loved every day. It's been many years since I left yet I can see her at the record player laughing. Her smile brighten the room and her belief and drive to make all of us the best we could be was fundamental and shaping me to become the woman I am today.”

**Meghan:** The joys of competing, her high expectations, work ethic, beauty, and the value she taught that lasted throughout their lives. Gloria Jean taught because she loved it. She just wanted to teach people how to dance. She didn't really care about making money. And she didn't – her studio broke even nearly every year.

But today, the dance business is a [billion-dollar industry](#). In 2019. The market size was \$4.4 billion. And it's projected to just keep going up. It's become so popular. Athletes have used dance techniques to up their game. [Kobe Bryant spoke](#) at the University of Southern California before he passed.

**Kobe Bryant:** There was a there was a year played Indiana Pacers in the finals. I rolled my ankle really bad. Jalen Rose stepped under me on purpose. He admits it now, finally, rolled my ankle really, really bad. I came back and finished the series. But I couldn't touch a basketball till mid September, which was driving me crazy because I couldn't train.

But I looked at, this is like the tenth time I rolled my ankle in one season. So I'm looking at that I'm saying, "okay, I gotta address that."

And so being that I couldn't get on the basketball court. What I did was I took tap dancing lessons. No kidding. I took tap and tap was like the best training for me in the world because it strengthened my feet. It changed my rhythm in my approach to the game. I was able to change speeds when I came back the following season.

You know I think dancers put way more strain on their bodies than athletes do. And I think there's a lot that can be learned from that. My daughter took ballet for several years. And I will sit there in the class right and I didn't know what I was getting into – I don't know anything about ballet, right?

But I'm sitting there in the class, and I'm watching her and watching to get the first position, the second position. And I'm starting – I'm learning the structure and the rules that go along with that. And as athletes, there's a lot to be learned from that. Because if you simply go out there and perform and play, yeah, you'll be great every now and then. But if you play with structure, if you understand the rules that come along with that, the discipline that comes along with that, then you reach another level. But you guys have my respect. If other people don't see that they're idiots. That's on them...

**Meghan:** He's absolutely right. A lot can be learned from that.

**Kobe Bryant:** By the way, I was a horrible tap dancer, by the way. Mamba mentality didn't translate to that shit, man.

**Meghan:** Dancers put their bodies through rigorous training. Sometimes that's good, but sometimes not. A lot of dancers have ended up having Body Dysmorphia or eating disorders. Two studies in the National Library of Medicine (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22860238/>, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24277724/>) discuss the prevalence of these disorders in dancers, they found dancers are at a higher risk for developing body dysmorphia. That's when no matter what your body looks like in the mirror, your brain cannot accept it. And eating disorders. When I was 16, about to join a Radio Disney tour, I developed both.

Mom always said she didn't want me to go into this business. She said it was too hard on your body, your soul, and your mind. She said women have to train twice as hard as men. And were a dime a dozen. She said entertainment is hard. You'll hear a thousand no's before you ever hear a yes. She said you'll have to accept critiques from teachers, sometimes really harsh ones, maybe even calling you fat, with a smile and a thank you. And that hasn't really changed since she danced.

But 30-plus years ago, dance was looked at differently than it is now. Although more women were dancing than men, it was the men who ran everything. That fortunately, has begun to change. Huge dance companies like the 90-year-old San Francisco Ballet didn't hire a female artistic director until 2022 – when it hired Tamara Rojo.

I didn't find out until I was about 9 or 10 (years old) that all of my siblings were actually half-siblings.

An older gentleman kept driving to our house and picking up my sister Christi. I went to my mom with my concerns about it.

She smiled and sat me down – explained that the older man was Christi's real dad. I didn't understand. I thought her real dad was MY Dad. But Mom explained I was her only child with my dad. She used to say I was the one that brought the family together.

Tracy was around 5 when my parents got married.

**Tracy Gill:** My biological mother wasn't in my life, didn't seem to have much interest. And then mom came into our lives and never once treated me like

anything other than her own son. And I never considered anything other than my mom.

**Meghan:** Around 75 people showed up to the funeral and even more watched it remotely. For the tribute tap class, Jenny and I decided we'd also offer it virtually.

I'm hoping we have similar numbers as the funeral. But I just don't know how many people will show up. I came into possession of at least 40 yellow legal pads, 10 to 20 spiral-bound notebooks, and a small cardboard box full of loose-leaf paper all containing Gloria Jean's old dance notes.

For the tribute class. I'm going to comb through and pick one of her combinations to reteach. Jenny said she'll lead the warmup, and I'll teach the combo. We have a date set, but I always get nervous and think, is anybody gonna show up? I guess we'll find out soon enough.

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