

Cha-Cha-Chairman McComsey has a passion for dancing

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Robert R. McComsey '66, chairman of the Alfred University Board of Trustees, is unabashed in his passion for Alfred University and for his avocation: Competitive ballroom dancing. The success he enjoyed professionally as founding shareholder of Neuberger Berman, a Lehman Brothers company, is echoed by his success in dance competitions. He and his professional dance partner, Olga Bylim, placed first in the U.S. National American Rhythm and American Smooth Championships for seniors (that's when the amateur is more than 60 years old) in September, and then followed it in November with a third-place finish in the World American Rhythm and sixth in the World American Smooth Championships. "My interest in ballroom dancing goes back to my youth when I danced (one time after playing hooky from high school) on 'American Bandstand'," McComsey recalls. While he enjoyed dancing (and watching other couples he thought danced well) at weddings, bar mitzvahs, benefits and other events, it was not until he was 50 that he decided to pursue it more seriously. "I wanted to learn how to do it properly," McComsey said. "That is, I wanted to learn how to do partner dancing, not the individual dancing we all grew up on, a la disco, etc." He enrolled in a Fred Astaire dance studio in Manhattan. "I signed up for five lessons and was very disappointed that after two I couldn't dance as well as Fred Astaire! So being type A and being very goal-oriented, I quit!" Persistence on the part of the studio manager for over a year persuaded McComsey to don his dancing shoes again. "After being pursued weekly by the manager of that studio, I took it up again, met my professional dance partner (Olga Bylim) and have been dancing competitively for 11 years," McComsey said. Olga and her husband Sasha came to America from the Ukraine where they were Ukrainian Standard Champions, then Russia's, and then here in the United States, national Fred Astaire Champions. Competitive dancing is not something to merely dabble in. "Starting out from scratch, I learned the four basic ballroom dance styles: International Standard (fox trot, waltz, ballroom tango, Viennese waltz, and quick step); International Latin (rumba, cha cha, paso doble, samba, and jive); American Smooth (fox trot, waltz, ballroom tango, and Viennese waltz); and American Rhythm (rumba, cha cha, bolero, eastern swing, and mambo)," McComsey said. "Competitive ballroom dancing forces you to become much more disciplined and focused and is a whole lot of work," he said. For the past five years, he has taken dance lessons five or six days a week for three hours a day. He competes monthly, either in the United States or overseas. "Once you've found the right dance partner - in my case, Olga - you are a partnership through thick and thin," said McComsey. "Judges around the world get to know both of you and as someone said, 'Dance partners spend more time together than husbands and wives!' This is a very serious hobby and very expensive because the competitors not only have to pay entrance fees, but also cover the cost of costumes and travel." McComsey notes it takes most men with no dance background about five years "just to learn how to use their bodies freely. Men aren't trained to do that. For women, it comes more naturally. Professional male dancers can make it relatively easy for their amateur female partners to look good since they are in the lead position," but for pro-am couples where the man is the amateur, as McComsey is, it is more difficult. "I not only have to lead, but also have to navigate the floor when many other couples are out there at the same time, protect my female partner and give her the lead to use her body in a full manner. It's not easy to do all that, plus keep our timing to strict tempo with music when we do not know in advance what pieces are going to be played." "At the highest of dance levels, it is common for the couples to use choreographers to work up their routines so they can dance to any music and compete in each heat, which normally lasts one and half minutes. That doesn't seem very long, but dancers, on average, have a higher aerobic workout in competitions than other sport out there. In fact, I lose, on average, five to eight pounds in competitions that last three-five days," McComsey said. The largest pro-am competition in the world is the Ohio Star Ball held in Columbus Ohio every November. If you are a serious competitor, that's the event you work towards all year long," he explained. "There are over 15,000 entries that take a full week to narrow down to the world's finalists. It is truly an outstanding event and it is the one that is broadcast on Public Broadcasting System as the American Ballroom Challenge. This year it will be shown in January and February." "Of course, the most prestigious professional event is the British Open - commonly known as Blackpool - held in May in Blackpool, England, where competitive ballroom dancing began. In any event, McComsey finds ballroom dancing well worth his investment in time and money. "I'm now 62 and will tell you, as do my children, that this is the best thing that has happened to me in terms of keeping me in shape, young in spirit, and psychologically balanced," he said. "It is truly a head sport that demands your intellectual, physical and creative development. Think of it as an extension of our education at Alfred."