

# Northeast Tarrant

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## Teacher got early foothold in dance

BY DOMINGO RAMIREZ JR.

STAR-TELEGRAM STAFF WRITER



STAR-TELEGRAM/IAN McVEA

Dance instructor Gene Willman Jr. polishes his fifth-graders' posture and framing at Wilshire Elementary in Euless. The group had a competition the next day.

EULESS -- More than 40 years ago, Gene Willman Jr. danced in a middle school locker room. It happened one day at Rosemont Middle School in Fort Worth, just as track team members were leaving for the day.

He was wearing only a towel around his waist after showering, Willman recalled, and a teammate walked up to him and asked him about dancing.

Without hesitation, Willman grabbed a mop for a partner and danced across the locker room floor.

"Then I heard this: 'Willman, get in here,'" Willman said. "It was coach, and I thought I was dead meat."

But Willman lived another day for one reason -- he could dance.

"Coach asked me, 'What were you doing out there?' and I said I was showing some of the guys how to dance," Willman said. "Coach then asked if I could teach him because his wife had wanted to go dancing. I

said sure. A few days later, she came up to the office, and I took them out to the gym and showed them a few steps."

That was the ballroom dancing springboard for Willman, 56, one of the top dance coaches in Texas and one of 18 instructors in the Hurst-Euless-Bedford school district involved in Dancing Classrooms North Texas.

This spring, he was a ballroom dance instructor at Midway and Wilshire elementary schools, both in Euless.

Just 10 days ago, his schools won two silver honors and a bronze award in competition with Dallas elementary schools. In the two years he has taught in the district, his schools have won six gold awards.

"I don't get nervous for them," Willman said, referring to his young students. "I love every one of them, and I believe they have the confidence to do the best they can."

### **Early dancing years**

Willman never planned on being a ballroom dance instructor.

But he tagged along with his parents, Gene and Gonzala Willman, when they went to Latin dances at The Rocket in Fort Worth's north side and at Guys N Dolls in south Fort Worth.

In time, he knew how to salsa and cha-cha on any dance floor.

He joined the Marines when he turned 18 and afterward worked in the printing business for 12 years. During that time, he volunteered with the Cub Scouts, Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts.

"One day, the company I was working for was downsizing, and I was going to be let go," Willman said. "I didn't know what I was going to do. I drove around and ended up near this dance studio in Fort Worth. I looked inside, and this man saw me and waved me in."

The man was a dance instructor who was looking to hire dance teachers.

"He asked me if I could dance, and I said sure," Willman said. "I had to come back for a tryout, and I got it."

### **Professional work**

For the past 20 years, Willman has made his mark at dance studios across Texas and Oklahoma. He has won many awards as a dancer and teacher at local and national ballroom, country-Western and Latin dance competitions.

He's a director at dance studios in North Texas, Oklahoma, Austin and San Antonio, teaching private and group lessons.

He knows 21 dances, but his favorites are the tango, swing, salsa and shuffle.

### **Fifth-graders at H-E-B**

Despite all his other professional duties, Willman still found time for kids in the H-E-B district. He started as a dance instructor last year with Tarrant County Youth Collaboration's Dancing Classrooms North Texas, a 10-week dancing program for fifth-graders in the district.

"For some instructors, they just couldn't get comfortable with kids," Willman said. "That wasn't me."

That's because Willman is part Marine drill instructor, part coach, part counselor and part ballroom dance instructor.

He's Anthony Quinn, Antonio Banderas and Fred Astaire, all rolled into one.

"He brings such high standards here," Wilshire Principal Jonathan James said.

Patti Salmons, Wilshire assistant physical education teacher, agreed.

"He can cut up with them, but if a student starts to get out of line, the Marine in him does come out," Salmons said.

The program is more than just dancing.

"It's a way to improve students' social skills," Willman said. "It gives students confidence, a way to become strong."

That awkwardness of fifth-grade girls and boys holding each other and dancing isn't even a hurdle for Willman.

"I bring up Emmitt Smith and his time on *Dancing With the Stars*, and almost everyone has seen it," Willman said. "I ask them if he danced with his partner far away from him or not. I tell them that he and his partner danced as a team, and that's what we need to do."

To the kids, Willman is "Daddy-O" or "Gene, Gene, the Dancing Machine."

Wilshire fifth-grader Jayce Palmer called him a good teacher.

"He's nice," Jayce said. "And yes, he can really dance."

Willman says that he loves teaching kids.

"I want them to leave a better person than when they first met me," Willman said. "It is what I hope with every student."

**Gene Willman Jr.**

**Age:** 56

**Background:** Born in Corpus Christi; graduated from Trimble Tech High School in Fort Worth; served eight years as a Marine, spent almost three years in Vietnam; attended Tarrant County College

**Dancing experience:** Has taught professionally for 20 years; member of the U.S. Independent Dance Council, the Texas Country Western Dance Association and the United Country Western Dance Council

**Family:** Two sons, Gene Willman III and Chad Willman; and a daughter, Becky Kingston

*ramirez@star-telegram.com*

*DOMINGO RAMIREZ JR., 817-685-3822*