

## Mary Murphy: She Does it Her Way – Dancing, Laughing, Inspiring!

*Ballroom Dance Champion/  
'So You Think You Can Dance'  
Judge/Choreographer /TV  
Personality/Non-profit innovator*

**Age:** 58

**Born:** Lancaster, Ohio

**Marital Status:** Single

**Education:** Ohio University, B.S.  
Physical Education, Modern Dance

**Occupations:** Professional Dancer  
and Entertainer

**Residence:** San Diego, CA



## Mary Murphy

### Accomplishment Highlights:

*(partial list)*

- Judge and choreographer on the Fox television series “So You Think You Can Dance”
- Guinness Book of World Records holder for hosting the World’s Largest Merengue Lesson
- Dance double for Julia Roberts in the movie “Something to Talk About”
- Appeared in “Dance With Me,” starring Vanessa L. Williams
- Owner of the Champion Ballroom Academy dance studio
- Passionate participant in various philanthropic initiatives

### Awards & Honors *(partial list)*

- U.S. National 9-Dance Champion
- U.S. National Ballroom Finalist
- U.S. National Standard Finalist
- Austrian National Champion
- S.A.G., N.D.C.A., I.D.T.A.
- Lifetime Achievement Award, 2007 Heritage Dance Classic
- Nominee, Favorite Judge, The 2006 Reality Remix Awards

# Discovering Passion for Ballroom Dance

By Marsha B. Felton



Murphy with judges Jenna Elfman and Nigel Lythgoe

**MBF: You were raised with three brothers, always had a competitive sports nature and planned to be a track coach. How did you discover your passion for ballroom dance?**

**MM:** That was a mystery to my entire family! I went to Ohio University to run track and loved modern dance as an elective. After college, I moved to Washington D.C. and got a summer job at a ballroom studio. The owner took me to see the U. S. Ballroom Championships in New York City. As the double doors opened, it was magic for me...I saw crystal chandeliers, couples in gorgeous costumes whirling across the floor, performing complicated patterns and elegant movements in harmony with the music. This was a sport, athleticism with beautiful artistry of dance! Immediately I announced I wanted to be the U.S. National Champion...I had started my journey!

**MBF: You have achieved an impressive list of accomplishments, including the U.S. National Professional 9-Dance Championship and Austrian National 10-Dance & Ballroom Championship. What motivated you to choose such challenging competitions?**

**MM:** That's the competitor inside of me! It's like being a decathlete. I loved them all but it wasn't easy. Some years I was teaching at least 6 hours and practicing 8 hours so I could specialize in completely different dance styles (e.g., waltz, foxtrot, rumba, mambo) in one event for the championships.

**MBF: Did you ever want to quit when you'd worked so hard and didn't win a title?**

**MM:** Absolutely, many times. Especially after winning the Austrian Championship, then I competed in the U.S. Championship. From the top 6, I dropped to top 12. I changed coaches,

costumes, dance partners. When you're at your lowest, that's the time to get up and persevere, which I do and did, with determination.

**MBF: Which championship do you value the most?**

**MM:** Even though it is more prestigious to dance all over Europe and be in major finals, winning the U.S. title, which I originally set out to do, still means the most to me. That's why I could retire the very next day!

**MBF: You've coached many celebrities to dance, appeared in movies and performed on Broadway. In the movie "Something to Talk About," you were a dance double for Julia Roberts. You also had a memorable experience with Robert Duvall. Tell us about this!**

**MM:** It wasn't until I won (150 couples auditioned) that I learned it was for Julia Roberts 'Game On!' Julia was lovely and very nice. I had to teach her during a North Carolina winter in a dance tent with a plywood floor and

*For 11 seasons (also 4 in Canada) Mary was an ebullient judge and choreographer on television's 'So You Think You Can Dance'*



Murphy with Calvin Jones on the Emmy's red carpet



Murphy leads the "World's Largest Merengue" lesson with Osteo Bi-Flex

space heater. Robert Duvall: He would hang out on our dance set. I had no idea he was doing research for The Apostle. One day, he spontaneously asked me to go to hear gospel singers at a church way out in the boondocks....they rocked and I'll never forget it!

**MBF: How do you like the moniker "Queen of Scream"?**

**MM:** I certainly understand how I got that title! At no time did Fox ever say how I had to be, they always said just be yourself. In the ballroom world, we scream for dances and dancers. It's like I do at sports events. I was shocked that after my first uninhibited scream, it became a media and worldwide sensation...to this day!

**MBF: What is your "Hot Tamale Train"(HTT)?**

**MM:** I wanted to distinguish fabulous dances and dancers. To go from the 'platform' to the HTT, it has to be earned. Sometimes on the show and

*Got Passion?*

*Yes! + Compassion = In Action!*



Early dance competition

when I travel internationally, I am asked if I will put someone or a dance on the Hot Tamale Train. I turn them down; it is my unique choice and appreciated by competitors.

**MBF: How do you balance personal feelings while giving criticism to contestants, sometimes in front of millions of people?**

**MM:** Criticism is always a tricky thing. I think I was one of the first TV judges who handled it in a really good way. I never felt I had the right to hurt someone's soul. It can be shattering and inhumane; it's never easy if you say something negative to another human being, particularly on national TV.

**MBF: You have infectious enthusiasm and a natural gift for developing rapport with others. What makes you happy?**

**MM:** My life, like all of us, has had ups and downs. I think I was born with an extra happy gene. After 1-3 days when I am down, I am very blessed to find humor. I'm very happy at my Mary Murphy's Champion Ballroom Academy which I founded 26 years ago. It's my sanctuary. My instructors and students learn and have fun with a



Murphy and executive director Jennifer Ables of Soldiers Who Salsa at charity event

sense of comfort and community. They are like family to me.

**MBF: What is a dance ActiveOver50 readers can do at home?**

**MM:** The merengue is one of the easiest dances to do and it's a great workout. I recently hosted the "World's Largest Merengue Lesson." Merengue has side steps, bending and hip rolls. There also many dance and exercise videos with music that I do too!

**MBF: You founded 'Mary Murphy's 'Chance to Dance' in 2006. Over 4,000 children, teachers and families in under-served communities have participated. It has evolved to 'Let's Dance Kids.' What inspired you to start this non-profit organization?**

**MM:** A retired teacher inspired me to teach children in trouble. We partnered with a San Diego-area school district to offer dance classes as opportunities for exercise, learning about culture and arts as a regular part of their curriculum. School systems have none or reduced budgets for the arts. I completely funded it myself, provided dance

instructors and made it free to the school system.

**MBF: How did you become a visionary part of 'Soldiers Who Salsa: Healing Soldiers One Step At a Time'?**

**MM:** I was contacted by a physical therapist who'd begun teaching salsa to wounded active military and veterans. He called me to sign autographs and bring professional instruction. At first, I was nervous to see people with so many injuries, and then I was totally inspired watching their physical growth and social engagement. I offered one of my instructors who became Exec. Director. Dancing

salsa has been added to psychological therapies. I am thrilled to now be on the Board as we expand around the country.

*"O body swayed to music,  
O brightening glance  
how can we know the  
dancer from the dance?"*

*- from Among School Children by poet  
William Butler Yeats*

**MBF: On the 'Celebrity Bucket List' (Lifetime TV) why did you, aka 'Mama Mary,' choose to give this experience to Alysha?**

**MM:** Alysha is like the daughter I never had. She was a gunner in Afghanistan; Alysha and her fiancée returned with PTSD. So, we shared a special weekend and I taught her a romantic dance she did with her husband as their first wedding dance. Certainly meant more to me than going on an exotic adventure.



Celebrating world's largest merengue lesson with Derek Bowen of Osteo Bi-Flex, Murphy and Michael Empric (right) of Guinness World Records

**What's Next?**

- \* *Hollywood Dancesport Championships, Halloween weekend.*
- \* *Holiday Dance Classic in December, Las Vegas. ActiveOver50 readers can buy tickets to watch and be part of the non-stop festivities. Dancers are 5 to 95!*
- \* *Triple Threat, a new show covering all things dance on ASN, American Sports Network. Beginning February 2017.*



**ABOUT MARSHA B. FELTON**

"I'm on the 'inspiring and motivating' beat. I cover exciting people and uplifting endeavors."

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