

# GROUNDZERO

## Catching up with (the first) Clara



19 HOURS AGO • BY JEFF KORBELIK / LINCOLN JOURNAL STAR

*I woke up one night and sat up in bed to see  
a beautiful vision holding a golden key.*

*The vision I saw was whirling and twirling  
with a delicate hand she was calling to me.*

*I recognized her face in an instance,  
could it be?*

*The one I most admire,*

*my dance teacher who guides me.*

*At times there are tears that she wipes away,*

*at times we act silly and laugh and play.*

*She has given me the inspiration that unlocks the door,*

*to a world of dance which I now live for.*

**-- Angela D. Robidoux**

Without looking down at the yellowed sheet before her, Angela Robidoux Beery recited the poem she wrote in 1985 word for word.

“Here it is almost 30 years later, and I still have that, yet I don’t know what I did last week,” she said with a laugh.

Now a Lincoln dance studio owner and instructor, Beery penned the piece for a pageant. It’s about her dance teacher, Shari True, who believed so much in Beery that she cast the then-13-year-old as her first Clara for the holiday classic “The Nutcracker.”

“I read this now ... That is SO my dancers,” Beery said. “One time you want to laugh. One time you want to cry. But you do it because you love it.”

This afternoon at the Lied Center for Performing Arts, the Lincoln Midwest Ballet Company under True’s direction will stage the last of three shows of its historic 30th production, with Lincoln Pius X High School junior Rose Kotopka dancing the coveted role of Clara.

And Beery, as she's done every year since she stopped dancing the ballet, will have attended one of the performances, joined by her 9-year-old dancing daughter, Hudson.

"One of the sweetest things that we do together is go to 'The Nutcracker,'" Beery said. "She just recently got to the age where she could audition for it. Last year I said to her, 'Hudson, do you want to audition for 'The Nutcracker'?', knowing it would be a hard balance between all the other things she's doing (in dance).

"She said, 'But mama, we couldn't go to the show together.' It was going to take away a very special time for Hudson and me ... That's kind of our special time -- to go see that."

Still, Beery, 42, wouldn't be surprised if Hudson one day changes her mind, especially knowing how much the ballet means to her mother.

Back in 1985, while others her age danced to Madonna's "Like a Virgin" or Starship's "We Built This City," Beery danced to Tchaikovsky. She started when she was 3 and began studying with True at age 8.

"Of course, dance has changed a lot, but when we were young 30 years ago that was kind of what we had," Beery said about "The Nutcracker." "Now, dancers have the opportunity to have so much, with workshops, conventions, guest teachers coming into the private studios and competitions.

"At the time, 'The Nutcracker' was our event. My dearest friends were there at the studio. 'The Nutcracker' also pulled a lot of different studios together. So somebody you didn't take regular classes with, you could still perform with them in the show. It was a lot of fun."

True's Ballet Midwest Dance Company -- which became Lincoln Midwest Ballet Company in 1989 after merging with Lincoln City Ballet -- staged three performances of the first "Nutcracker" in 1985 at Cotner Center Auditorium, which also served as rehearsal space, Lincoln High School and in Waverly. True ran a studio in her parents' house just outside Waverly.

True was a recent University of Nebraska-Lincoln graduate, who had spent her last three summers working with the Academy West Ballet School in California, where she saw opportunities galore for young dancers.

She decided to produce "The Nutcracker" after the Lincoln Community Playhouse had discontinued staging it. The Playhouse had presented four productions of it from 1980 to 1983, with True and Beery dancing in the final two.

"I was so willing to try anything," True said. "I was at that age where I was brave enough to take on things. When roadblocks were in the way, I found ways to hurdle them."

That first production featured "18 to 20 kids" -- a far, far cry from the more than 200 that danced in this weekend's production.

"We came from very, very meek and humble beginnings," True said. "It was, 'Hey, let's do this for the community and see who wants to help us out.'"

Beery auditioned hoping to land a major role, but not expecting it, she said. When True told her she was Clara, “of course, I was very honored and loved the opportunity. At the time, dance was my world, so this was a dream come true to be able to do that.”

And what a dream it was.

“It was wonderful, so exciting,” Beery said. “And it seemed to go very quickly. I remember thinking about all the time (we put in), and then it was over.”

Heck, Beery’s mother even awarded her with a Sheltie puppy after her first performance. Beery named it Tiffany.

“The people that were a part of that first show were such a tight family,” Beery said. “Some close friends that I still have were a part of that. We were all so passionate about making this opportunity available to Lincoln. It was just so fun, and such a part of our life.”

Indeed, it was. Beery continued to dance in “Nutcracker” productions through her first two years in college. She graduated from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and opened Universal Dance Academy with Vivian Ball, who, coincidentally, danced as Clara’s mother in the first “Nutcracker.” The duo are celebrating their 20th year in business.

Three of Beery’s dance students are her children: Hudson and boys Jack (13) and Paxton (7). She’s married to Rod Beery.

“I feel blessed I get to enjoy something that is so special to me with them,” Beery said. “We have a great bond, and one of the reasons we have such a great bond is that tie to dance. It’s really special.”

Beery said it’s a similar to what she shared with True, who said she “loves” that her former student made a career of dance and is “very proud” of her.

“She was my mentor, my teacher,” Beery said of True. “We spent endless hours together. As a dance teacher, you spend almost as much time with the children as their own families do. You become very, very tight with them and have a very special bond.”

And that’s why she wrote the poem.

“I wrote it as a little girl, looking up to my dance teacher,” Beery said. “Now, I’m on the other side, trying to help young dancers create memories that they will carry with them throughout their lives.”