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Features

The rhythm of love

George and Dora Quiles' romance has flourished for nearly six decades, both on and off the dance floor.

By DAWN REISS
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[Times photos: Brian Cassella]

George and Dora Quiles of Port Richey work their magic on the dance floor at the Mirage in Tampa on a recent Friday night. The two of them are in their 70s, and Dora is legally blind. Still, their moves have earned the respect of the much younger regulars. "They have carte blanche of the club," says Lenny Woods, the Mirage's weekend manager.

PORT RICHEY

Their weekly ritual begins. Dora stands in front of the bedroom closet, her eyes narrowed as she tries to see the clothes on their hangers. She can only make out a fuzzy blur, but that's enough. All she wants is to pick tonight's theme color, to decide how she and George will match on the dance floor.

Video of George and Dora Quiles on the dance floor:

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Sometimes Dora opts for red, her favorite, sometimes yellow or blue. This Friday evening, though, she envisions the two of them in something different.

"Tonight's color is lime green," she informs her husband. She picks a peasant skirt of that color, followed by a slenderizing black V-neck shirt. George, inverting her pattern, puts on black flat-front pants and a pale green button-up shirt.

Dora glitters. She is wearing three gold bracelets, plus two necklaces - one with a diamond-encrusted heart, the other with a pendant of gold X's and diamond O's - all matching her double-pierced ears.

A simple gold chain hangs around George's neck. He doesn't like jewelry but wears it for Dora. It's his only accessory.

"He doesn't need a wedding ring," she jokes. "He knows he's with me."

Once the two of them have dressed, George takes over. In the bathroom, he leans over Dora's face, first applying medium-brown eye pencil, then liquid liner and mascara as Dora looks toward the ceiling.

Then, as usual, they head for the kitchen, where George styles Dora's hair. Her color is Miss Clairol Red Ginger, and George attends to each strand. He fluffs, teases, maneuvers, sets everything in place with a steady stream of hairspray - taking care to cover her eyes. Finally he moves to her hands, brushing Revlon Bamboo gold polish on each nail.

It's 7:30. The Mirage awaits.



George Quiles helps his wife with her hair in the kitchen of their Port Richey home as they prepare for a night of dancing. Macular degeneration may have left Dora legally blind, but it can't keep her from dancing.



George Quiles isn't afraid to drop his hand a little low during a dance with his wife, Dora. They have been married for almost 49 years. "We don't feel old when we go there," George says. "It's like we change. It sounds silly and sounds far-fetched, but when we go there we're young again."



Dora and George share a laugh in their Port Richey home. "The minute I hear the music and I stand on the floor," Dora says, "I feel like I'm 19 or 20."

* * *

Two towering bouncers, both dressed in black, stand like human monuments guarding the roped-off red carpet leading to the Mirage's entrance.

George and Dora Quiles park their silver Impala in front of the Tampa club, at the intersection of Hillsborough and Dale Mabry. Unlike other clubbers, they get the first parking spot - the handicapped space in front - and are never made to wait in line.

"Give me a hug," says Dora, reaching up to one of the bouncers.

"Ah, Mamacita," he smiles in return. "It's good to see you."

The other bouncer greets her husband.

"Looking good, Georgie," he says. "Lookin' sharp."

George offers a handshake while Dora continues dispensing hugs. She gives them to everyone - the bouncers outside, the bouncers inside, the woman behind the cash register in the lobby, the bathroom attendants, anyone else she sees.

In the club, a life-sized cheetah - fake, but impressive nonetheless - prowls on the bar, flanked by fake flames. A fountain gurgles in the middle of the main dance floor. A videocamera captures the action on the floor and projects it, in movie screen fashion, onto a blank wall. A few people in their 20s and 30s wearing tight jeans and short skirts wander in.

Dora, who has seen it all many times before, calmly slides into her seat on the left side of the octagonal island bar. George takes his place beside her. This is their spot, and everyone knows it.

They each order a rum and Coke. As the salsa music starts, George gives Dora a knowing look and extends his hand. She grips George's arm tightly and the club's railing as they descend several steps to their favorite dance floor. It is their time alone.

They start off slow, then accelerate. Dora cha-chas from side to side. George shakes his hips and hoists his arms in the air. Their bodies twirl together in an orb of moving hips, hands and feet.

From the rest of the club, people stare in admiration. No matter how many times they have seen the couple dance, they still are amazed, because George is 78 and Dora is 75 and legally blind.

* * *

They met in 1947, when she was 16 and he was 19. She was Dora Elguera then. She lived in Manhattan, on 98th street between Madison and Park avenues, one block from Central Park. She attended Yorkville High, an all-girls vocational school that no longer exists. Her mother, a single parent after her father died when she was 10, scrubbed floors at night to support two children on a widow's welfare pension.

George came over from Puerto Rico as an 8-year-old in 1936 and grew up in Brooklyn. He was drafted in March 1945, six months before the end of World War II, as a teletypist in the Army Air Forces.

When George returned he wanted to learn how to dance. He'd go to the

house of a friend, Joe Ortiz, and practice with him each week. George would pull the shades down tight so no one would see them dancing. Little by little he began improving and ventured out to nightclubs.

He first saw Dora at the Palladium, the famous Manhattan dance hall. At the time, Dora was engaged to another man; that night, she lied to her mother about her plans.

"I told her I was going to the movies," she says, "but of course I was going dancing."

Wearing dark sunglasses and a pinstriped zoot suit, George walked up the stairs and noticed Dora, silhouetted against the lights. It was her first time there. He tapped Dora on the back as she turned around. Not saying a word, George pointed his finger to her and then back at him, motioning for the two of them to dance.

She took in the dark glasses and the zoot suit, then accepted his hand. It didn't even occur to her to say no.

"I was afraid if I didn't dance with him, I might get killed," she remembers, laughing.

They've been dancing together ever since.

* * *

Back inside the Mirage, they're holding court at the bar.

A tall, dark-haired beauty in a snug red and white dress approaches George.

"So nice to see you," he says as he kisses her hand and arm multiple times. "You look beautiful."

"Tell my boyfriend that," she says with a laugh, nodding to a man at her side.

George and Dora chat with other regulars who approach to pay their respects. Dora's cousin Marge stands with them.

Through the crowd, George spies a curvaceous young woman with long dark hair and a beautiful smile.

"I danced with you last week," he says to her. "Two more drinks and I'm yours again."

After an hour the music is almost deafening. Unfazed, Dora continues talking to a group of young women as George leads Marge to the dance floor.

Although Dora likes salsa, the tango is her favorite. It is sexy, romantic. "I can dance to it," she says, "but George can't."

"He doesn't have that Argentine feeling," Dora continues, swaying back and forth. "So we dance mambo, or salsa as they call it now."

They are street dancers, moving on the second beat instead of the first, like people are taught today.

George and Marge return from dancing.

"Keep talking, so I can keep stealing your husband," she tells Dora.

"Keep talking," adds another woman. "Because I'm stealing him next."

George laughs. Then he asks his wife for another turn under the lights.

* * *

After that first night at the Palladium, they lost touch for two or three years. George saw one of Dora's friends one night, and asked for Dora's number. The two of them started seeing each other again, meeting in Central Park during Dora's lunch break from a beauty shop as a hairdresser.

"That's how we renewed our love affair," George remembers. "But I can't tell you what happened under the bushes at Central Park . . ."

"If those bushes could talk . . .," says Dora, grinning. "Let's just say that behind the Museum of Natural History we were au naturel."

George re-enlisted for the Korean War as an airman first class. Dora began writing him love letters. Whenever he came home on leave, they continued to dance. The mambo. Lindy. Foxtrot. Any type of dancing they could do, they would.

"I even faked an emergency pass from Germany to come home so I could see Dora," he says.

In 1953, when Dora told George she was going to New Orleans with a girlfriend, he hitchhiked from where he was stationed at Shaw Air Force Base in Sumter, S.C., to Louisiana.

"Just so I could see her," he says.

"But I could never tell my mother I was serious with him," Dora says. "Because then she wouldn't let me go out and dance without him."

Even after getting married, they kept dancing. They were raising three kids. They were running two hair salons. It didn't matter. Every Saturday night, they were on the floor.

"We were lucky, my mother lived with us," Dora says. "When we wanted to go dancing she would watch the kids."

The years passed. Their children grew up and began having kids of their own. George and Dora sold their salons, retired, moved to Port Richey.

It wasn't until they moved here that they tried salsa dancing. They went from club to club, but most of them closed down. Eventually they found the Mirage.

Dora remembers the stares the younger people gave them the first time the two retirees walked through the door.

"They looked at George and I like, 'What the hell are these two old people doing here?'" Dora says. "They looked at us like we didn't belong."

She told herself to forget about it. Wait until they see us dance, she thought.

Lenny Woods, the weekend manager at the Mirage, says Dora is right.

"We did think they were a little bit too old," says Woods, 42. "Until they got on the dance floor and showed us up."

Now George and Dora are a club staple every Wednesday and Friday night.

"They have carte blanche of the club," Woods said. "We give them an escort to their car, and no one gets an escort to their car."

Their daughter Desire Tufan, 46, lives in Lutz and sometimes meets them at the Mirage. Her mom and dad, she says, know more people at the club than she does.

"And I'm the single one."

George and Dora have five grandkids now and have been married for almost 49 years. Their anniversary is Aug. 31.

Most of the friends who used to join them dancing don't go anymore. George and Dora hear them talk about operations, the pills they take, their aches and pains.

But at the club, all of those things fall away.

"We don't feel old when we go there," George says. "It's like we change. It sounds silly and sounds far-fetched, but when we go there we're young again."

"The minute I hear the music and I stand on the floor," Dora says, "I feel like I'm 19 or 20."

She has struggled with failing eyesight for 20 years, but it wasn't until eight years ago that macular degeneration took her vision. That's when George started putting on her makeup, helping her get ready.

Dora admits that she, too, gets tired sometimes.

"People hit a certain age and they say, 'I'm old I can't do it,' " she says. "They get into a habit. They have supper. The woman does the dishes and they sit down and watch television.

"You know how many times, in the winter time when it's cold out, the house is nice and warm, and I've finished cooking and doing the dishes, that I don't feel like getting dressed. It becomes a hassle. But I go in the bathroom, wash my face and start putting on makeup - that's it. I'm ready to go."

She talks about what it would be like to give in, to decide it's too much trouble to get dressed, to simply plant herself in front of the TV.

"That's what you do then, you sit and watch the box all day long, all night the rest of your life. I don't want to do that."

Dora likes to say she'll die on the dance floor. She's only half-joking.

* * *

One more time under the lights.

George guides her as she clutches the railing, holds her hand as they walk back down the stairs to the dance floor. Together they maneuver through a wall of people who respectfully make way.

As George and Dora begin to spin, bartenders stop and stare. Young women, flirting with young men, turn and watch.

The music rises around them. Dora shakes her body. George claps and wraps his arms around her. They pull close, break apart, pull close again. George reaches around and grabs his wife's behind. Dora smiles and screams.

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