Born to dance: Tammy Thornton struts her stuff with the Warriorsâ?? senior dance team

Description

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Itâ??s game night at San Franciscoâ??s Chase Center and the Golden State Warriors are not the only fan favorites wowing the hometown crowd. At the top of the fourth quarter, they give up the floor to a crew of swaggering, strutting, seasoned dancers aged 55 to 80, known as the Hardwood Classics.

The atmosphere is electric and deafeningly loud as the amped-up dance squad bursts out of the tunnel leading to the court. Tamala â??Tammyâ?• Thornton goes full out in perfect unison with her dance mates in front of 18,000 fansâ??redefining what aging looks like with every move.

In the 90 seconds theyâ??re on the dance floor, the Warriors 55-and-up co-ed dance team rocks the stadium with their high-energy choreographed stomps, splits, and arm waves. The music is blasting, the audience is screaming, and every dancerâ??s face is beaming as they shake their booties and toss their hair. Often, the fans start dancing, too.

Thornton believes the fansâ?? outsize enthusiasm stems from seeing people who look like their grandparents, their own mother or father, an aunt or uncle, or even themselves on the court. She said she feels electrified every time she performs, the same rush of adrenaline she imagines the Warriors feel when they take the court.

â??After we dance and weâ??re walking back through the hallways,â?• she said, â??fans will recognize us and start yelling â??Oh, we love you guys so much!â?? and boy, does that feel great!â?•

Tammy Thornton swinging it during a performance with the Hardwood Classics. (Photo by Josh Leung via the Warriors)

The senior dancers come from varied backgrounds. While some might be seasoned pros, others had no practical background in entertainment but loved the Warriors and felt inspired to audition after watching the Classics perform. On the court, charisma is just as important as endurance and flexibility. The main prerequisites are joy, dedication, and high energy.

So how does a 60-year-old San Francisco woman end up performing before 18,000 Warriors fans?

Some people seem like theyâ??re born to dance, and Thornton, who is 60, believes her â??dance genesâ?• were encoded from the start. â??My mother took modern dance classes at the Mason-Kahn Studios, and she took me along with her,â?• she remembered. â??Iâ??d be on the side dancing while they practiced, begging her each time, â??I want to take classes, too!â??

â??It took years, but she finally enrolled me in a dance class when I was 9. Thatâ??s when I discovered I did have natural abilityâ??I had the rhythm, the coordination, and the passion to dance.â??

Years of training

Thornton trained in ballet, jazz, modern, tap, hip-hop, Afro- and Latin-style dances, and performed in numerous musical productions throughout her lifeâ??but dancing was a passion rather than the focus of her life.

She attended the University of San Francisco right out of high school in 1984 but dropped out in 1989 before completing her degree. Five years later, newly married, she began earning degrees in accounting and health management despite suffering the loss of her firstborn and a life-threatening bout of sepsis in 2002.

When Thornton and her husband welcomed another son in 2004, she happily embraced â??being a full-time, stay-at-home mom who was involved in everythingâ??I was that one.â?•

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Tammy Thornton in uniform. (Photo by Robbie Hitchcock via the Warriors)

Wanting to get back into dancing once her son was grown, Thornton learned about the Hardwood Classics auditions. Remembering four years ago when she got the call that sheâ??d made the team, she recalled, â??It was exactly 4 oâ??clock, and I was driving, and I just had to pull over to scream and cry, â??Oh my gosh, oh my gosh.â?? I was so happy! â??Iâ??m going to dance with the Golden State!â?? â?•

San Francisco born and raised

San Francisco born and raised, Thornton grew up in the Western Addition and started school in North Beach. In third grade, her parents enrolled her in a private Catholic school, and she filled her after-school time with jazz dance classes, tap dance classes, tumbling, and ballet.

When Thornton entered high school at San Franciscoâ??s Star of the Sea Academy, â??the 1980 film â??Fameâ?? was so big,â?• she said, â??then came the â??Fameâ?? TV series and the musical â??Sweet Charityâ?? starring Debbie Allen, who I loved! I spent years in front of the TV dancing madly around my living room.â?•

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By the time she was a high school sophomore, Thornton was making the honor roll, continuing her dance training, and playing on her school basketball and volleyball teams. â??Somebody showed me how to pass the ball with my arms, and I was like, â??okay, boom, boom, boom!â??â?•

She got the nickname â??Catwomanâ?•because she was so graceful on the court. â??When I lunged for the ball, Iâ??d do a split trying to reach it, things like that. People loved it.â?•

> The Hardwood Classics excite the crowd during a recent performance. (Video by Daniel James, via the Warriors)

Thornton received numerous volleyball scholarship offers and chose the University of San Francisco to stay near her close-knit family. Despite her scholarship, she failed to make the team, leaving her to wonder if at just 5â??6,â?• maybe it was because she didnâ??t have the height.

â??I was crushed, because I loved volleyball and I was very skilled at it,â?• Thornton said, â??but now I figure it was meant to happen, because thatâ??s where my passion for theater and performing grew.â?•

Entering college right out of high school, Thornton was simply not ready. â??I wasnâ??t performing well academically, and that didnâ??t do anything for my self-confidence, of course.â?• She dropped out, and it would take more than five years for her to start community college and resume her education.

Her first degree was in accounting, and sheâ??s now working towards a masterâ??s degree in health information management.

Aerobics boom

â??When I went to college seriously, I was working and newly married,â?• Thornton recalled. â??I still took dance classes regularly, but then I got into fitness during the big aerobics boom of the â??80s.â?• While taking courses, she earned a fitness teaching certificate and started teaching classesâ??high-impact and low-impact aerobics, step aerobics, cardio-conditioning kickboxing, and a lot of strength

training classes.

She started her own fitness services business in 2000, but two years later when her firstborn died, she stopped. â??You do everything right, you know, in terms of taking care of your body, and when something happens, it erases everything that youâ??ve told yourself over the years, and you kind of have to start over, emotionally and mentally,â?• she said.

She became seriously ill after the birth. â??I should have died, but I think being so physically fit and strong helped me survive. Iâ??m a believer, and I see it as simply not being my time.â?• But she still grieves. â??I keep him alive in my heart,â?• Thornton said. â??I have his name tattooed on my ankle.â?•

After a year and a half, she and her husband, Kurtis McKinzey, had another son, and they agreed she would be a stay-at-home mom. â??I told myself, â??I ainâ??t going nowhere!â?? Iâ??m taking no risk. Heâ??s my angel.â?•

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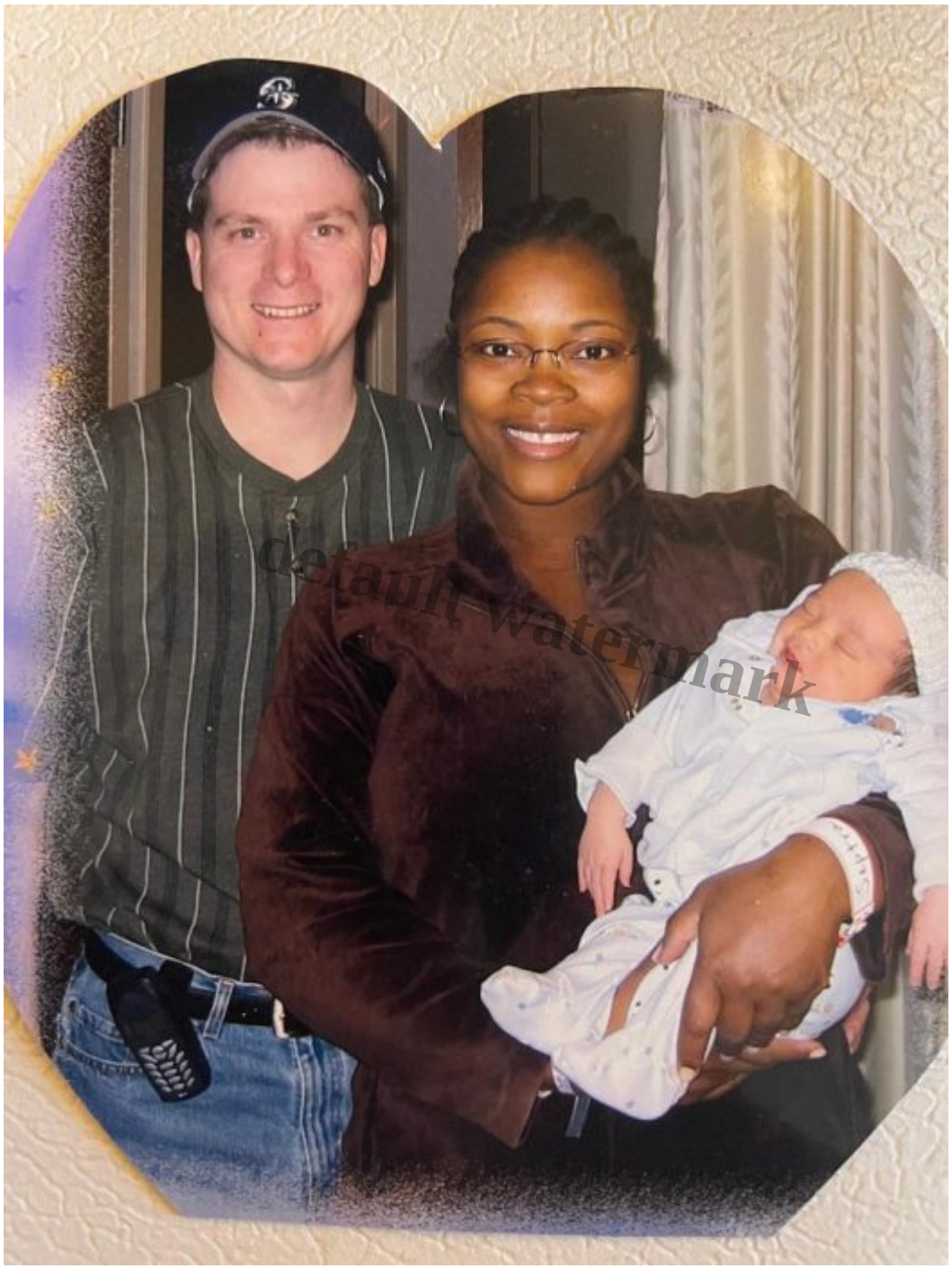

Tammy and Kurtis take their son home after his birth. (Photo courtesy of Tammy Thornton)

While caring for her son through high school, she started an at-home childcare service for infants to preschoolers. â??That really fed the emptiness â?? holding a baby,â?• she said. It also left time in the evenings to return to dance classes.

Once her son graduated from high school, Thornton realized she missed performing. â??Once itâ??s in you, thatâ??s who you are,â?• she said. â??I was just sitting around really sad, dang it, and then I remembered a friend of mine had told me about the Warriors having a senior dance team. At the time, I donâ??t think I was of age, but now I was 55 and a thought, wait a minute â?¦â?•

Thornton searched online and found the Hardwood Classicsâ?? annual tryouts period was open. She completed the application, submitted a headshot and a dance video based on the choreography directions she was sent, and from there, the judges would select the semifinalists.

She qualified for the second round of auditions, which included performing a routine provided by a Warriors choreographer and a freestyle performance of her own design.

Thornton may be born to dance, but to make the Hardwood Classics senior dance team, itâ??s not a question of having the right genes; itâ??s training and motivation that turn these energetic seniors into passionate, professional movers and shakers.

The first Classics team was formed in 2018; the last season the Warriors were at Oracle Arena in Oakland. The Warriors now have four dance teams: the official Warriors Dance Team (formerly the Warrior Girls), the Junior Jam Squad, the hip-hop Blue Crew, and the Hardwood Classics.

Performing with the Classics is hardly a joy ride; itâ??s hard work. Each 90-second performance of â??80s and â??90s-style hip-hop dance routines requires three intense rehearsals in Walnut Creek, augmented by hours of at-home practice. Dance team members travel from all over the Bay Area and beyond â??with some even coming from as far away as Los Angeles, Reno, and Palm Springs**.**

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Some of the squad members may feel a bit more pain than their younger counterparts, but they power through and tough it out, Thornton said, â??because we share a passion for performing and a huge enthusiasm for the Warriors. We all know this moment is a gift.â?•

While theyâ??re paid for their performances, rehearsals, and additional event attendance, the time spent being together on their own time is priceless, Thornton said. The members have potlucks, share family events, and â??there are a couple of women that Iâ??m very, very close to,â?• she said. â??We share our private lives, and thatâ??s a circle I never even had as a younger woman.

â??We are so closely knitted and bonded, itâ??s a group thing. Weâ??re not one superstar, and everybody else is a backup dancer,â?• she said. â??Formally, weâ??ll say weâ??re team members, but we are definitely a family. Some of our parents have passed away during the seasons, some of our parents have gotten ill, and just being able to have people who understand and empathize with what youâ??re dealing with, and also be able to offer you some advice, some suggestions, some support, itâ??s just golden.â?•

Tammy Thornton and a teammate performing. (Photo by Josh Leung via the Warriors)

Thornton and her family live in Lower Pacific Heights; she and her husband donâ??t talk about retirement because they both love working. Heâ??s an environmental scientist and a military veteran, a pilot and search-and-rescue team member. Their son is interested in aviation and â??theyâ??re both big science nerds,â?• she chuckled, â??so when they get into scientific discussions, I smile and say, â??have at it!â??

Like veteran crew member Jan Yale, who officially retired from the squad at 80 following the conclusion of the 2024-2025 season, Thornton plans on enjoying many years of dancing with her beloved Classics.

She hopes to be like her mother, who didnâ??t leave her accounts payable position at a property management company until age 82, to take care of Thorntonâ??s father. Now that her aging parents have been affected by medical conditions, itâ??s a wake-up call for her. Sheâ??s staying with the Classics as long as she can.

â??At this stage of life, usually youâ??re not making new friends and things like that. This is just the complete opposite. Weâ??re out there just having fun, enjoying life, and showing a different side of what getting older looks like, you know?â?•

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Category

1. Life in the Later Lane

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