

The Pied Piper's Taps:

Al Gilbert, the legendary "Pied Piper of Dance," was born, Allesandro Zicari, on July 12, 1921. Al came from a generation in time, when people valued one another and truly cared. During that time, people really seemed to genuinely treasure one another's friendships and supported their endeavors. This was in an age and era without technology. Thus, people reached out more to one another. They talked, were friendly, and neighborly, and they built relationships and bonded. They tried to make life easier, more palatable, and they freely and without reservation lend a helping hand. People, of this era also assisted by helping unconditionally to those that were less fortunate.

Al Gilbert, affectionately known as "Uncle Al, Star Maker, Dance Educator, and "teachers' teacher" career lasted well over 60 years. He was a no-nonsense instructor who inspired and motivated all. He was internationally known, and could simplify steps in a way no one else could. "At a time when nothing like it existed, Music works website says it best...Al's revolutionary vision to create instructional dance material for dance instructors and their students generated a trend that changed the entire dance industry." Al codified syllabi for tap and jazz and made a long, lasting impact on the dance world. From the earliest days, when he worked side by side with his brothers, on the back street-corners of Rochester, New York, Al Gilbert made dance even more accessible without even realizing it.

It was 1954, a beautiful spring day, in the state of California. My mother was driving down the street, Pico Blvd. in the city of Los Angeles, with me by her side, in our 1952, two tone, blue hardtop, Chevy. Momentarily, she looked up, and spotted a sign. It read "...Al Gilberts Theatrical Dance Studio. Being the progressive thinker and person that she was, she turned the corner, parked the car, took me by my little hand, and walked into his front doors to talk with him. That was well over 45 years ago. It was a very magical moment as he greeted us both. After seconds of entering his door, my mother and I both knew. It was my privilege to be his friend, his student, and become a teacher, who has carried on his precious legacy to our disabled community in so many ways.

There is not much talk or literature on Allesandro Zicari, and how Al gave of himself and his time unconditionally to the disabled world. So I will. He helped all that

came to him. Even those disabled girlfriends, who I went to school with; whom my mother personally recommended.

Al Gilbert, dance teacher, poet, author, and humanitarian, proposed to come to my handicapped elementary school and give of himself and his talents unreservedly. He was enthusiastic and eager to teach other disabled children, and give his time to our community. Although, even the master in taps that he was- because he did not have a college teaching degree, he was blocked by "the experts." Time and time again he "proved it could be done" while the experts said it couldn't! He was a leader in his own right, and made an impact on everyone's life he touched.

Including mine! I remember that day well. I remember vividly. I was a young toddler, only three and a half years old. And, to remember so vividly, after so many years is truly a blessing. I remember how he unconditionally loved, me, and how he gently took me under his wing and nurtured me. I remember how he taught me to dance, and how he would look down at me with his smile. His kind and mild temperament along with his encouraging words, taught me how to hop, skip, jump and run. He also taught me to point and flex my toes, and gain movement in my ankle that I may never have developed if it weren't for him. No therapist ever gave to me like he gave of himself. Because of his teachings, and his techniques; my once twisted body, straightened out, along with my left leg. Now, not only did my dragged foot and flopped, out to the side gate, correct itself- But I was able to hang my full length brace up in my closet never to wear it again at the age of 11 years old. His unwavering dedication and devotion week after week, year after year, recital after recital of lessons taken with and without my brace proved to dramatically change me and my physical being.

Gently but firmly, I remember him reminding me to bend my knees; while doing shuffles, shuffle hops, or shuffle bal-changes. I can recall him clearly telling me to turn my knee out for better positioning, and I can remember hearing his voice on his tap technique records. Al gave me a ballet bar too, along with a book about a little girl who had weak legs, who got strong again through dance- only to become a ballerina. On another trip, he came back with symbols. His unwavering unique, and loving approach towards me, tried every way possible to motivate and encourage.

Every chance I could while at home, I would practice after all my other therapies lessons were done and completed. So, with discipline, a willingness, and an open - mind, I would put my record player on, only to hear Al's soothing, voice instructing me as he always did.

I also can remember him making my lessons fun, calling my mother up to have her bring me into his studio for extra lessons, without any charge. He use to say to my

mama... "...that Karen's smile was payment in full... that that was all he needed." On another occasion, he even began piano lessons. He made this fun as well, as his playful side would come to check up on me and the piano teacher every chance he could. Never once did he let on it was to make my left fingers and hand stronger.

I remember the closeness we had, and how our friendship grew and developed over decades and time. I trusted him, I respected him and his word, and I talked to him like he was my daddy, when I lost my own. He became the temperate figure I looked up to for strength and endurance. He became the rock and pillar in my mind's eye to endure all. He gave me a quiet love, acceptance and devotion for not only dance, movement, and rhythm, but he bestowed upon me a burning desire and passion which could not be denied. His love and enthusiasm for music, rhythm, and man-kind was passed on, body, mind, and soul. I knew what I wanted to become, and I was going to become it. I was going to follow Al Gilbert's footsteps even though I had Cerebral Palsy. I was blessed with the same gift, as Al... I was born to dance just like all the other students before and after me that he endowed with his skill and talent.