

# Let's Dance!

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*Photo by E. Kuhner*

**Bruce Mitchell (1936-2021)**  
Dancer, teacher, performer, leader, director

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# ***BRUCE MITCHELL***

*March 18, 1936 - October 2, 2021*

Bruce Mitchell passed away at his home on October 2, 2021.

Bruce was born to Don and Bernice (Bee) Mitchell in Stockton, California. Bruce was preceded in death by his wife Ginny, the mother of Chris and Sean, his two sons, on January 5, 1970, and his wife of 38 years, Leanne, on October 11, 2020.

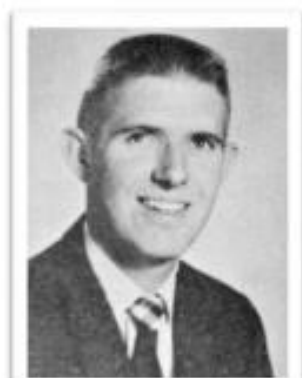
Bruce worked for 38 years as a teacher and principal in the Rio Linda Union School District. Leanne was also a teacher and principal in the same school district, where they met and eventually married in August of 1982.

Bruce was well known for his love of folk dancing. He began dancing at the young age of 16, and the dance world took him to many locations throughout the United States as well as to other countries. For 50 years he directed a recreational folk dance and performing group called Camtia. They performed at Sacramento Camellia Festivals and Octoberfest celebrations throughout California. He served as Director of the Stockton Folk Dance Camp at the University of the Pacific for 25 years and continued as a dance instructor and mentor for the folk dance community.

Dance brought Bruce much joy and fulfillment in his life, but he was also an avid fisherman, fan of the Giants, 49ers, and Sacramento Kings. He enjoyed collecting stamps, and loved making sausage soup for the family at Christmas.

The Mitchell family will be organizing a Celebration of Life for both Bruce and Leanne in the spring of 2022. Family and Friends look forward to acknowledging and remembering the many connections and the lives that the Mitchell family touched.

See pp. 16-19 for additional stories and memories from *Let's Dance!* readers.



# REMEMBERING BRUCE MITCHELL

Because Bruce Mitchell lived here in the San Francisco Bay Area, his presence will be especially missed. The Sacramento International Folk Dancers have an article on their website about Bruce that was written when they made him a member of their Honor Roll in 2011 ([folkdancesac.org](http://folkdancesac.org), Featured Dancers). That article includes information about Bruce's many dance classes and performing groups. On these pages, *Let's Dance!* readers and others have shared their memories of Bruce and the impact he had on their lives.

## TK & Mai, Hong Kong

On behalf of the Budlet Folk Dance Club, we would like to express our deepest sympathies on your loss. Bruce taught us for four years in Hong Kong and has been our honorary advisor over the past few decades. Bruce was also the advisor of the Hong Kong Dance Federation. We are very grateful to him, we love the dances he taught, and we think he is now sharing the dances he loves with others in a far off place.

The folk dancers of Hong Kong who have learned from Bruce often say that the dances Bruce chose to teach were fun and of a wide variety. Losing him is really a loss to the folk dance world.

## Fang-Chieh Chen and Taiwan Folk Dancers

All of the folk dancers in Taiwan mourn the passing of our dear friend, Bruce. At this moment, he must have met his wife Leanne in another world, dancing his favorite dances. We pray for him sincerely, and express our thoughts and condolences with a heavy heart. We have so many photos from the years he visited us in Taiwan!



Bruce with Leanne during a visit to Taiwan in 1983.

## Trudy Baltz

When I began dancing again in 2010, after a 30 year hiatus, Bruce was a pillar, perhaps the most important one of all, of the folk dance world for me. It is utterly disorienting that this pillar has cracked and fallen.

All of us experienced Bruce's public self for many years: Director of Folk Dance Camp and the almost otherworldly voice that channeled the Candlelight Ceremony's depth and reverence up until lockdown. But he also invested countless hours in less visible stewardship of folk dance collections and history. He created and led performing groups, and faithfully taught dances week after week in long-standing recreational groups. Over ten years ago, he started IDS (International Dancers of Sacramento), a group that concentrated on a rich variety of couples and set dances. IDS was characterized by extreme (and I mean *extreme*)

goofiness, a side of Bruce that not everyone has been blessed to witness. It was a wonderful and life-affirming escape from difficult realities that any one of us might be experiencing, and was a lifeline for Bruce in the years he assumed the weight of care for his wife, Leanne, during her final years.

Bruce also reached out to me over the years for one-on-one conversations about our lives. This was a treasured space for us both, where we could share both heartaches and triumphs of families, children, and illnesses. I know Bruce's public self could at times seem a bit imposing and reserved, but during these shared conversations, he was vulnerable and deeply empathic.

Bruce's absence will feel immeasurable and disorienting to all of us for quite some time, all the more so because of the dislocations and attenuations of COVID. I hope, in time, his dedication and passion will transcend, or at least assuage, the loss of his person, and will provide renewed faith and commitment to the many worlds he created and nurtured. May we always celebrate and remember him.



The "goofy" side of Bruce.

## Denise Heenan

[Bruce and Denise were married 1971-1980.]

Picture a young Bruce Mitchell in the 70s with his military crew cut. I believe it was Jerry Helt who commented that, when he met Bruce, he didn't know whether to salute or shake his hand! If you didn't know Bruce, you might understand the reason that many, seeing a tall, straight, military-looking man would think that he was a rigid, unbending task master. That façade probably served him well as a school principal. And, perhaps, for self-protection, it kept people he didn't yet know at arm's length.

In reality, Bruce was approachable and friendly, and sometimes a softy. He loved to have fun, share jokes and stories, and to participate in pranks. He even encouraged others to create and join in such activities.

Bruce completely dedicated himself to international folk dance as dancer, teacher, group leader, and artistic director of Camtia Dance Ensemble. He further demonstrated his love for international folk dance by serving for 25 years as Stockton Folk Dance Camp Director. He enthusiastically promoted its message of community, cultural sharing, and understanding through dance and music.

There was much more to Bruce than dancer and organizer. He was a gentle and kind person who braved many of life's ups and downs by carrying on, working diligently, and always striving to move forward. As a caring companion, Bruce was always appreciative of home cooked meals, special desserts, and other expressions of care. Bruce's fishing trips with the boys, summer dancing on the Green at Land Park, and fun times at Camp Sacramento are among the many special memories recently shared.

Bruce is missed, but there is comfort in knowing he is at peace, a life well-lived.

## Radboud Koop

This is really sad news. One of the greatest and kindest folk dancers is no longer with us. His legacy will no doubt continue forever. All strength and warm feelings to his family and nearest. Let's remember him with the deepest respect.

## Jan Volkoff and Jim Shoemaker

Jim Shoemaker and I have known Bruce for a long time. People might not have realized that, among his many talents, Bruce was a bit of a matchmaker. After all, he is the reason Jim and I ended up together. We became yet another couple that found true love while folk dancing.

We became drawn to each other particularly at Bruce's evening folk dance classes at Arcade Middle School in Sacramento in the 1970s (or was it 1980s?). And yet, Bruce was even more of a planner. He had infiltrated my own family much earlier than that! My grandparents, Adolph and Hildur Benson, were Scandinavian folk dance teachers in Sacramento in the 1950s and they started going to Stockton Camp. When I inherited my grandmother's scrapbook, there was Bruce at Stockton Camp in 1952, along with my grandparents! Bruce enjoyed seeing this photo when I shared it with him.

By the way, subsequent to our true love at Arcade Middle School, Jim and I were in Bruce's folk dance performing groups, and Jim helped at Stockton Camp nearly every year he could. We seemed to get roped into helping at various other events that Bruce coordinated over the years. Thanks, Bruce, for being part of our lives.

## Jeff O'Connor

I've known Bruce Mitchell most of my life, not only through Stockton Camp, but as a family friend. My

parents danced with Bruce's parents in Kalico Cutters based in Stockton. I was 13 or 14 years old when I begged my parents to let me go to Sacramento to dance with Bruce's dance group Camtia. I can attribute learning many dances from him and performing at many festivals. Over the 60 years of knowing him and the many years at Camp, our friendship continued as colleagues and as a mentor during his 25 years of being director. I will deeply miss seeing Bruce and his leadership.

## Sonia Dion

It is with great sadness that we learn this news. Bruce was indeed a great man, an important figure in the dance

world and like a father to Cristian and me. We share our feelings and wishes to his family and friends. May he rest in peace.

*(continued on p. 18)*



Denise with Bruce and their sons at the 1974 World's Fair in Spokane.

## **Remembering Bruce Mitchell – continued**

### **Jan Wright**

Bruce had such an impact on our (Chet's and my) lives. He was also definitely a good friend. While Chet and I originally took folk dance classes from his mother and father, later we often found ourselves on the road from Stockton to the Sacramento area to join Bruce's folk dance classes (often hauling along 2 or 3 of our young children as well as Jeff O'Connor!). Bruce always encouraged us to continue with dance groups in our own area, and often, thanks to his leading and encouragement, had our own folk dance group, occasionally giving small performances in many different areas.

My first airplane flight ever was with Bruce's group to southern California to perform there.

His encouragement led to Chet and me being part of Stockton Folk Dance Camp for many years. I remember sneaking into his office there at times to type up a report on the rummage sales that Darlene Clark and I organized and took part in. He gracefully allowed it!

I'll always be grateful for his impact on our lives. Now in my late 80s, I live with my youngest daughter, Sue, in Altadena, California, still giving thanks to Bruce's leading in our lives, and am lucky to still dance a couple of times each week with two different folk dance groups. Many thanks, Bruce!

### **Barbara Bevan**

In 1976, I took a weekend class for school teachers on international songs and dances. I went for the songs and discovered I loved the dances! I asked where I could go to do more. The teacher recommended Bruce Mitchell's "Dancing on the Green," dance classes in the summer in William Land Park. I attended Bruce's class all that summer. I kept hearing excited talk about "Camp," and I learned that referred to Stockton Folk Dance Camp. So, in 1977, I took the plunge as a very new dancer and went to Camp knowing about five dances and five people. I had so much fun that I have been every year since then! In the fall, Bruce's class was held in a local school multi-purpose room. I loved that class!

Bruce was a school principal and director of the dance performing group Camtia. Several of us new dancers urged him to form a Balkan performing group. We convinced him, and Seljan Dance Ensemble was born. We wore an assortment of ethnic

clothes (embroidered shirts and blouses, vests, boots, opanci, and sashes), and we performed at schools, ethnic festivals, and city events. We decided we needed an official costume and chose Bulgarian. One member designed our costumes which we all had to sew and embroider ourselves, including the guys. Quite a challenge! Bruce hired Billy Burke to choreograph a version of Daichovo. After about nine months of rehearsing, sewing, and embroidering, we were ready.

Next, Bruce wanted us to learn a Macedonian suite. We spent the next nine months rehearsing and working on our new costumes. For about three years, Seljan Dance Ensemble performed often. (Poor Bruce broke his leg at one rehearsal!)

Then Bruce was ready for a change. Influenced by the popularity of Richard Powers, Bruce formed Vintage Dancers of Sacramento. Most of us from Seljan made the radical switch from Balkan to vintage dance. Vintage costumes were easier to come by at thrift stores, yard sales, and vintage clothing shops. Some of our women actually sewed their own costumes! The men had it easier - just a tuxedo! This group lasted for many years.

Around the time Bruce retired, he formed a recreational dance group he called the Tuesday Dancers. He and I shared the teaching of a variety of international dances. Meanwhile, Camtia was still going strong, doing mostly German and Austrian dances. Camtia lasted for 50 years!

As if he didn't have enough to do, Bruce was asked to become the director of Stockton Folk Dance Camp when Jack McKay died. Bruce served as director for 25 successful years.



Seljan Dance Ensemble. Bruce is on the far right.

In addition to teaching, directing performing groups, and directing Stockton Folk Dance Camp, he had time to chair two Statewide Festivals held in the Sacramento area! He was also Folk Dance Federation President (1968-69), Treasurer, and Director of Extensions. He always participated on the board of Sacramento International Folk Dance & Arts Council guiding us with his vast experience.

We all thought Bruce would go on forever. We were shocked about his sudden death. He has influenced so many folk dancers that, in a way, he is going on forever. Rest in peace, dear Bruce. We all miss you.



The Vintage Dancers. Bruce is third from the right.

#### **Gergana Panova**

I am very sorry to hear this sad and shocking news. Bruce was the man who first invited and received me in Stockton in a very hospitable, warm-hearted, and open-minded manner and who helped my research in an unforgettable way. I will always remember him with gratitude, respect, and love.

#### **Suzanne Rocca-Butler**

Bruce was extraordinarily dedicated to folk dance, giving it his all. I saw this first hand working with him for fifteen years on the Board of Stockton Folk Dance Camp. He took on many tasks, including the maintaining of the Lawton Harris Folk Dance Library, one of a

kind in the world, of folk dance descriptions, music and videos. It was and is an invaluable source of dance history and information. His dedication to dance was coupled with his loyalty to family and even brought him to Camp while trying to take care of his late wife, Leanne. He made a great contribution to folk dance.

#### **Ahmet Lüleci**

I will miss him. He was indeed a very special person to many of us. He will be remembered with greatest respect and love. Rest in peace, Mr. Director.