

Meet Our Volunteers | Sandy Runkle



Since the age of 14, Sandy Runkle dreamed of being a dancer in Las Vegas. She finally fulfilled that dream at age 64 after moving to Las Vegas and joining the University of Nevada Las Vegas' Senior Adult Theatre and Senior Jazz Dance. People who meet Ms. Runkle may wonder why a woman with so much motivational energy deferred her dream for 50 years. But a lot happened during those years, and it's everything that happened along the way that makes Ms. Runkle so fascinating.

In 1968, at the age of 24, Ms. Runkle found herself the mother of five young boys, each one year apart in age, and the wife of a man diagnosed with schizophrenia. When her husband was institutionalized for the first time, she spent more than a year on welfare. She was amazed to find how resourceful she could be at stretching \$207 a month to feed, clothe and house her family of seven. With a bit of good fortune, answers to prayers and charisma, Ms. Runkle secured a tuition loan, the gift of a car and the gift of babysitting services, which allowed her to return to school and become a court reporter. She maintained her intellectually and financially satisfying career for 24 years. While she worked her way through school and spent countless hours practicing on the stenotype machine, Ms. Runkle recalls saying to herself, "We will never be hungry again."

Along with this resolution came two more: creating a normal

life for her sons, despite the challenges their father's periodic institutionalization presented, and honoring what has become a lifelong commitment to advocating for mental health/brain disorder issues.

Fast forward to 1994 and Ms. Runkle's arrival in Las Vegas, where she met Sam, the love of her life. They spent a beautiful 10 years together riding a Harley, riding in their 1979 Mercedes convertible and spending time in Mazatlan, Mexico. After Sam's death in 2004, she immersed herself in the city's theatrical opportunities and taking lessons from some of the Strip's iconic performers.

As part of her involvement in senior issues at UNLV, Ms. Runkle obtained a Certificate in Gerontology and, in the fall of 2008, served as a panel moderator at the university's Conference on Aging. Panelist Charles Bernick, MD, now associate medical director of the Cleveland Clinic Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health, suggested she keep an eye out for the center's opening and sign up as a volunteer. Ms. Runkle became the first volunteer.

Ms. Runkle enjoys working with director of volunteer services Dee King, who allows her to select interesting assignments and carry them out in her own way. To date, Ms. Runkle has volunteered at the annual galas, welcomed guests at numerous fundraising events and greeted patients arriving at the center. She especially enjoys giving tours. On June 29, 2010, Ms. Runkle performed in "Caregiver Collage," a reader's theatre performance by UNLV's Senior Adult Theatre that addressed the challenges of being a caregiver (see article on page 37).

Today, 50 years after first dreaming of dancing in Las Vegas, Ms. Runkle counts among her friends a number of retired showgirls, entertainers, UNLV students and Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health volunteers. She will work as much as needed to further the research and development of a cure for all brain disorders taking place here at the Lou Ruvo Center for Brain Health and changing the state's healthcare landscape, as well as the burdened lives of millions.