Hot selling video makes Cecil 'First Lady of Cajun dance'

By Dixie Simon
Staff Writer

Betty Cecil is everything a local girl should be — born in Carencro, reared in Lafayette, and a resident of Scott for 12 years.

She's also the First Lady of Cajun dance with a best-selling video to prove it.

"I have no idea where the notion of making a dance instruction video tape came from," she says. "I needed thousands of dollars to produce one and I had no money."

During that period in 1988 every time she opened her Bible, she said, it seemed the text kept urging her to do something — heal the sick, set captives free, take some kind of action on behalf of her fellow man.

She says, "So many people are afraid, have low self-esteem, are embarrassed or shy. They don't know how to heal themselves. They've lost the ability to have fun."

"Finally I just said I'd do the tape in two weeks. That's what faith is anyway, believing when you don't see it. That's the way I make most of my life decisions," she says, "I just do it."

Channel 10's Jim Olivier, Cecil's good friend, stepped in to provide a camera operator and film editor. (If you watch closely you can catch Olivier in the background of the video doing vocals with the band.)

A relative volunteered his nightclub facilities for the taping and soon after, a Cajun dance video star was born.

According to Cecil, a florist by trade, the hardest part of the whole project was learning how to teach dance steps and movements.

"We had no script for the video," she confesses, "but I knew in my heart exactly how I wanted it — basic, slow and fun."

It was the search to put a little fun back into her own life that led her to dancing in the first place.

In 1980, after 20 years and the birth of four children, Cecil's marriage ended in divorce.

Pacing to rest her glasses on one knee and run a hand through salt and pepper graying hair, she hyperbolically reflects, "I cried 24 hours for two years."

A class in international folk dance at Girard Park and later Cajun dancing with friends got her life moving again. Cecil says dancing was her "survival from divorce."

By her list of credits, not only has she survived, but prospered.

Modest even in recognizing her own accomplishments, Cecil was shocked when in 1984 she was named best female Cajun dancer in Louisiana.

Following that, from a field of 2,000 applicants she was voted a resident artist for Cajun dance by the Louisiana State Bureau of Tourism and Recreation (FolkLife), qualifying her to teach the technique throughout the United States.

In 1985 she danced at the Smithsonian Institute's Festival of Folklife in Washington, D.C. as a Cajun culture representative.

"They went crazy over Cajun there," she says, recalling how big city businessmen rushed to the Cajun pavilion daily at the Smithsonian Mall, shedding their ties and suit coats to get a little Cajun music and dancing on their lunch hours.

Cecil says many she met there have visited Louisiana three or four times since then. Often people from other states come up to her at local dance spots and say with pride, "I learned to Cajun dance from your video, and look at me. Now I'm here doing it in person!"

Not content with just teaching traditional Cajun waltz and two-step dances, Cecil is also an innovator. She has been instrumental in developing and popularizing the Cajun "jig," a technique that incorporates complex turn movements into a two-step type pattern.

"Other traditional Cajun dances have their origins in Europe," she explains, "but the jig was started right here."

Fun to do and easy to learn, the jig, according to Cecil, reintroduced a whole generation of young Cajuns to their parents' music and dance traditions.

She says it's Cajun dance and music that have put Cajun on the map. It's the "joie de vivre" — the fun of it, that gives it universal appeal.

"Some will never have the grace and rhythm to be dancers," she notes, "but anybody can learn to dance and enjoy it."