

Giselle Fernandez,
with partner Jonathan
Roberts, gets her kicks
on ABC's megahit
show "Dancing with
the Stars."



Photo: Courtesy of ABC TV

Toned and sexy
at 45, Giselle
Fernandez
captivated millions
on "Dancing
with the Stars."
Here's her recipe
for thriving
at any age.

BY JIM SCHMALTZ

Stepping Out

YOU MAY NOT BE ABLE TO CHANGE THE WORLD wearing a sequined camisole dress, but if you're Giselle Fernandez, you can certainly make an impact.

As an Emmy-winning journalist, Fernandez — without the sequins — interviewed such world leaders as Fidel Castro, Bill Clinton and Henry Kissinger. She's been a production executive, humanitarian, children's book author and public health advocate, particularly in the Hispanic community of Los Angeles. But the telegenic 45-year-old beauty trumped it all when she competed on ABC's smash hit "Dancing with the Stars." The leggy Latina became an instant inspiration to millions of female viewers — and a desirable "older hottie" to male fans who followed her every pirouette, leap and lunge.

While her father was an accomplished flamenco dancer, Fernandez had never seriously hoofed until she agreed to perform on the popular reality show. And although her toned physique is the result of a lifelong passion for strenuous exercise, this dance contest was no mere funky chicken under a disco ball.

"I practiced six hours a day," says Fernandez, who competed against the likes of WWE wrestler Stacy Kiebler and eventual winner Drew Lachey. "I loved learning something new, challenging myself and achieving a goal."

In the algorithm of reality TV, celebrities easily risk becoming national punchlines, but Fernandez literally kicked up her heels and went for it. Tangling with Castro, no problem; tangoing in front of millions of viewers, now that's pressure.

"To get out there at my age and do those wild leaps in front of millions of people was the most exciting thing I've ever experienced," she says. "Anytime you put yourself out there like that, you're very vulnerable. You say to yourself, *My God, what if I make a fool of myself? What if I can't get through my dance routine?* For all those reasons, I'm proud of myself."

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LET'S GET READY TO RUMBA

Though she was voted off the program in week three, Fernandez's showing on the popular dance program hit a nerve when she found her in-box holding 66,000 e-mails from viewers, most of them female baby boomers who admired her middle-aged moxie.

"I was so moved by the reaction of these women who wrote to me, saying, 'You have inspired me to get off the couch to lose some weight, to get fit, to set new goals,'" she says.

Her new fans have chosen their role model well. Fernandez is a tireless promoter of the fitness lifestyle, and is currently writing a book called *D.A.N.C.E Your Way Through Life*, which distills her years of experience in exercise and nutrition into a sensible and effective regimen.

"I've done everything from yoga to Pilates to running to step exercises," she recounts. "I've done every kind of exercise you can imagine to find what was right for me, and I think I have gained a lot of knowledge during the past 25 years. It's a passion."

She's gathered the major themes of her life lessons and compiled them into what she calls her five "jewels" of healthy living. "I hate rules," she says, "so I call them jewels." (For more, visit her Web site, www.casagiselle.com.)

One way that Fernandez connected with so many female viewers was that she embraces her age instead of concealing it, as other celebrities do.

"Women lie about their age because they don't feel they can be sexy or attractive when they're older. Beauty is not just about flawless skin and being 20. I think there's a lot of charm and sex appeal in a woman who owns who she is — her age, her experience, her body," she says. "Women like Catherine Deneuve and Lauren Bacall, whom I interviewed when she was in her 70s, are beautiful, with their wrinkles and hearty laughs. Their life experience is very sexy to me."

ATTRACTIVE AT ANY SHAPE

Embracing who you are and accepting your body type are at the heart of Fernandez's philosophy. As a child with weight problems, she grew up with a sharp awareness of the connection between body image and a sense of self-worth.

"You are your body type," she states. "Embrace your body type and then say, 'How can I make myself the best I can be? How can I look good in all my clothes?' And the way to do that is by accepting yourself."

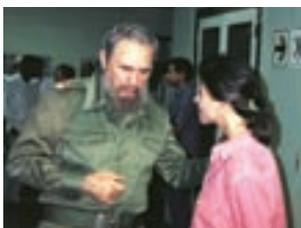
"To embrace yourself, to be exactly who God intended you to be instead of dimming the lights to make it more comfortable, that's a fulfilling experience."



Above, Giselle Fernandez with some of her favorite workout buddies. Right, with musician Steve Vai at the Grammy Awards pretelecast show on Feb. 8, 2006.

Photos, left to right: Courtesy of casagiselle.com; Frank Micelotta/Getty Images

A career in pictures...



:: 1991-94 "CBS Evening News"



:: 1995-96 "NBC Nightly News"



:: 1996-98 "Access Hollywood"



:: 1997 "Cafe Olé"



:: 2000-01 "This Week in History"

Fernandez came of age when lithe, thin beauties, such as Cheryl Ladd and Farrah Fawcett, dominated pop culture, but she quickly accepted that she'd never be one of Charlie's Angels. "I'm a muscular type. I have a very short waist, and I'm very athletic. This is who I am," she says. "But a lot of women grow up being pressured to be skinny, and if they're not, then they're not OK. That's the first hurdle you have to get over, and a lot of us never get over it."

She encourages women to flaunt their own unique essence, no matter their shape. "I see really heavy women who

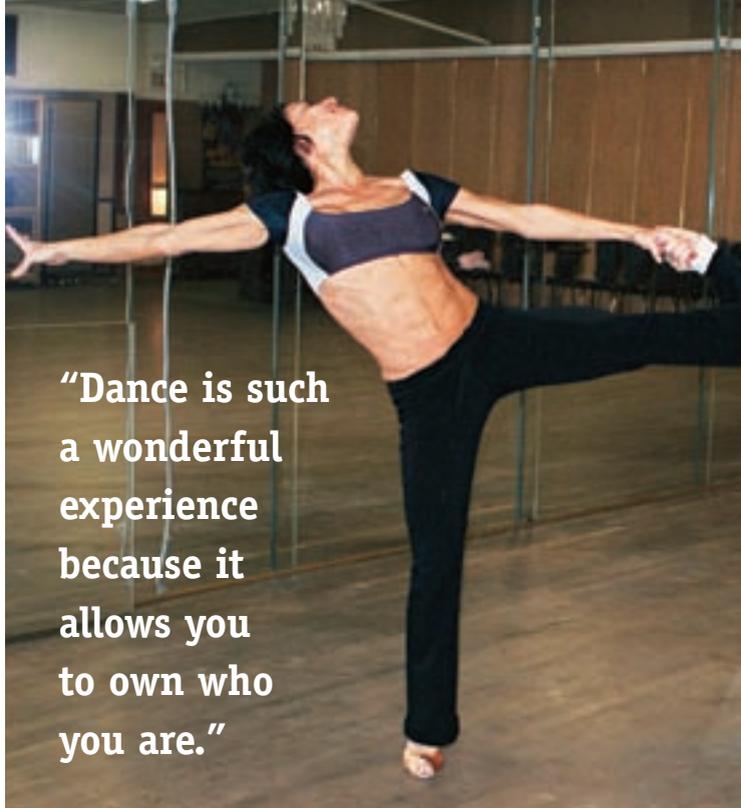
are sexy. Why? Because they are comfortable in their own skin," she says, pointing out that ethnic differences can often work in your favor. "Latina women have a different ideal of what looks good. We like a little meat on our bones. We like to have a booty."

Fernandez believes that you'll have an easier time accepting your physique if you connect with your body through daily exercise. "You have to commit to some form of exercise every day. And it's not about the amount of time you do it or about the level of intensity. Just do something active for 30 minutes a day to train your mind and body to connect together," she stresses. "Be conscious every day of toning, stretching, breathing and strengthening your body. From there you can build 30 minutes a day into an hour. But the most important thing is a commitment to consistency."

"Think of it like brushing your teeth: You wouldn't skip it just because you're too busy. Give your body the same attention."

Fernandez's approach to nutrition is defined by moderation, not deprivation. "Women are event-dieters. We want to have a boyfriend, we want to get married, so we want to have a perfect body — whatever that is," she says. "But I believe it's a lifestyle choice. The diet has to be very simple, or it will be broken."

She recommends lots of fruits and vegetables, some nuts and grains, but few starchy carbs. "You can have any protein — meat, fish or poultry — in reasonable portions. And have a glass of wine or dessert if you really want it,



"Dance is such a wonderful experience because it allows you to own who you are."

just don't overdo it. If you deny yourself too much, you'll fail. What's important is that you get the necessary fuel to stay energized."

FROM MODERATION COMES BOLDNESS

Fernandez's passion for fitness doesn't stop at the gym door. She and her husband, John Farrand, former CEO of Panavision, have dedicated themselves to various health-related causes. A board of trustees member of

giselle's five jewels of living fit

Here are Giselle Fernandez's five ways to achieve a fit and healthy lifestyle.

:: **ACCEPT YOURSELF.** Embrace your body type, and work on making what you were born with the best it can be.

:: **COMMIT TO SOME FORM OF EXERCISE EVERY DAY.** Even if it's only for a few minutes, get started, and learn to feel more connected to your body.

:: **NOURISH YOUR BODY.** With moderation as your guide, fuel your body in a healthy way to give yourself more energy and vitality.

:: **REWARD YOURSELF.** Don't fall into the trap of making your fitness lifestyle drudgery. Do something fun to reward yourself for your hard work.

:: **BE BOLD.** Take the lessons you learn from the fitness lifestyle, and apply it to other goals.



Childrens Hospital Los Angeles, she is active in fighting children's obesity. She also supports numerous charities that fight breast cancer.

When she started her broadcast career, Fernandez entered a mostly white male profession, but the journalist, who was born in Mexico City and raised in Southern California, eventually triumphed in both national and local markets as an anchor and correspondent. This is no shrinking violet. While her fitness philosophy is based on moderation and consistency, her life approach can be summed up simply as “Be bold.”

“I’ve found that the very same template of goal-setting you employ in fitness can be applied to reaching other goals in your life,” she explains. “Whether it’s your career or financial achievements, you can create an action plan and lay the groundwork to achieve a new life.”

Her drive and courage to step up to new challenges has always rewarded her — whether probing a controversial Latin-American leader or waltzing on prime-time TV.

“How do we know what we’re capable of if we don’t test ourselves?” she asks. “If you’re so trapped in fear that you can’t begin something new or strive for a goal, you stop living.” ■



2001 “Politically Incorrect”



2001-03 “KTLA Morning News”