

Opinion



# I'm a 48-year-old English professor, and the 23-year-old who plays Spider-Man changed my life. | Perspective

A mysterious disease robbed me of my ability to dance. Tom Holland is helping me get it back.





Screenshot of Tom Holland dancing to Rihanna's "Umbrella" as part of a lip-sync battle.

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by Dawn Fallik, For The Inquirer  
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It sounds crazy to think it, say it, let alone write it in permanent internet ink. I'm a 48-year-old English professor, and 23-year-old Spider-Man, Tom Holland, changed my life.

You wouldn't know to look at me, but I used to be a dancer. I started ballet at age 4, then added tap, jazz, and pointe. I loved it. I could always just dance. Show me a routine and I had it, from triple time steps to splits. In a world where I was bullied horribly because I was overweight, dance was my safe space.

My mom, sister, and I were recently watching old tapes of my dance performances. My sister helpfully pointed out that my teacher always put me in the back row. Who wants a fat dancer in the front? I had never noticed.

I didn't care. I kept dancing, three times a week, until I went to high school. I wasn't allowed to move to the top group because they danced in public, and they didn't want someone like me

representing the company.

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So I quit them. But I didn't quit dancing.

At age 43, I was doing a visiting professor gig at the University of Kansas. I started having trouble walking. I lost my balance easily. I was tired. Doctors couldn't figure it out. They sent me to the Mayo Clinic, where they thought I had an autoimmune disease. My bone marrow was weird. My

red blood cells didn't stack properly. My white blood cell count was high. Doctors at the Hospital at the University of Pennsylvania and Johns Hopkins University were equally stumped.

The disease took everything I loved away. My muscles screamed opening a cabinet door. I went from strolling miles on the beach to falling when I stepped on sand. I could barely walk a block, and that was with a cane. I had been the fun friend always up for doing something crazy. Now it was hard to do anything after 7 p.m.

I stopped dancing entirely. I spent an extraordinary amount of time sitting on the couch watching television. I didn't want to think about anything of substance. I didn't want to think about anything at all.

Then last January, someone sent me a link to the episodes of the TV show *Lip Sync Battle* with Tom Holland against his *Spider-Man* costar Zendaya. I hadn't heard of either of them.

Zendaya does a great job as Bruno Mars, but Tom Holland, who has an extensive dance background, stole the show. He starts as Gene Kelly, doing a little shuffle to “Singin’ in the Rain,” and then strips down to a corset, fishnet tights, and wig, dancing to Rihanna’s “Umbrella.”

He completely owns the stage. He’s fierce and charismatic and confident and sexy. The last time I saw a dancer who shook me that much was Patrick Swayze in *Dirty Dancing*.

All I could think of was how much I missed feeling that way. To step on a stage and take over. To know that you had the steps, the character, to completely control your body and make it do what you want without thinking. To stand out in the best of ways.

I watched that video and I cried. I cried for all that I had lost, for the life I had known. But now Tom Holland had given me a goal, and I had a plan. I got off the couch. I started doing physical therapy. I began trying to walk again, even if it was just up and down my little West Philly block.

Recently, my family went to Rehoboth Beach. I went to the shore with my mom. And I walked from the boardwalk to the ocean's edge on the sand, without a cane. It was slow and a little stumbly, and it wasn't far, but I got there.

Tom Holland is coming to the Keystone Comic Con on Sunday to talk about his latest movie: [Spider-Man: Far From Home](#). I paid an obscene amount of money — almost \$300 — to get a picture with him. I feel ridiculous, because he's a 23-year-old superstar and I'm ... me. But I know I'll regret it if I don't.

[In a recent interview](#), he said he wishes people would stop talking to him about his *Lip Sync Battle* performance and get over it. I can't.

When I'm in a lot of pain and am struggling, sometimes I watch the battle again. It reminds me of where I want to be. Maybe not in a black corset and fishnet tights, but feeling that fierce and confident and fine.

It's been eight months since I first saw the video. I rarely use the cane anymore to walk. Although I can't stand for very long, I can do the tree pose for a few seconds. Sometimes at night, when no one is around, I turn off the lights and channel Tom Holland. And then I dance.

## Who you should see at Keystone Comic Con

Keystone Comic Con will be held the Pennsylvania Convention Center from Friday, Aug. 23-Sunday, Aug. 25. A three-day general assignment pass is \$80, and premium tickets, which allow for early access, are \$155. VIP tickets are sold out. For more info, go to [www.keystonecomiccon.com/](http://www.keystonecomiccon.com/)

### Celebrities include:

- LeVar Burton, who played Lieutenant Commander Geordi La Forge on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and hosted *Reading Rainbow*.
- Michael Dorn, who played Lieutenant Commander Worf on *Star Trek: The Next Generation* and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*.

- John Carpenter, who directed many horror movies, including *Christine* and *Halloween*.
- Tom Holland, who plays Peter Parker, aka Spider-Man, in several *Avengers* movies as well as his latest, *Spider-Man: Far From Home*.
- James and Oliver Phelps, who played the Weasley twins Fred and George in the Harry Potter movies.
- Marina Sirtis, who played Counselor Deanna Troi on *Star Trek: The Next Generation*.
- Gina Torres, who plays Jessica Pearson in the television show *Suits*, and was also in *Firefly* and *Angel*.

*Dawn Fallik is an Associate Professor at the University of Delaware and can be reached [@dfallik](#) on Twitter.*

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