By Amy Morgan

Madonna Kerness had been waiting all her life to ballroom dance. Despite her husband Victor’s pre-wedding promise to dance with her, it wasn’t until his death three years ago that she was able to follow that dream.

She waltzed into the Fred Astaire Dance Studio in Stone Oak and signed up for classes.

“People were just so nice,” she said. “They never did ask my age (on record – 76). I learned a lot of things that are helpful - I learned about my core and how to stand on one foot and not fall over.”

She began classes with instructor Farenc Kiss from Hungary, whose Eastern European accent has been a source of much amusement. “He kept telling me to use my ‘heeps’ she laughed. I didn’t know what my ‘heeps’ were!” Growing up in the Midwest in the 1950s, nice girls were taught how to move WITHOUT using their “heeps,” she added.

Subsequently, Kerness has become a star pupil at the Fred Astaire studio, taking classes twice weekly, and has even traveled across the state to compete in dance competitions. She says she has really nailed six dances – among them the Tango, Foxtrot, Waltz and Rhumba. – but not the Texas two-step, one of the only dances of which she is not fond. She’s learned how to carry herself, to keep her frame and never let her feet leave the floor, but glide in special suede-soled dance shoes.

“I’ve met so many nice people. It is a lot of fun,” she added. When KENS-TV needed a senior citizen to feature in its Keep Moving spot last spring, Kerness was the natural choice. She and friend Helen, a fellow resident at Independence Hill Retirement Community, also exercise with the Mays YMCA Silver Sneakers group.

Kerness has lived at Independence Hill Retirement for a little more than a year. She and her family are very pleased by the community it affords. Although she lives autonomously in a comfortable apartment with her 9-year-old Shihtzu, Betsy, she has friends and fellow residents for companionship and staff members upon which to call in case of emergency.

“I love knowing that somebody is going to check on me; it is a sense of comfort,” she said. “When Victor was gone, most of the people in the apartment complex where I lived worked and were away all day. There was no one to help when I broke my wrist. Here I feel safe, and there are all kinds of things to do.” Kerness’ other hobbies include playing golf and bridge and working crossword puzzles in ink.

She developed her love of dance growing up as an only child in Indiana. Although her family was not wealthy, she had the opportunity to take tap and ballet lessons, social dancing at 12, as well as water ballet at the YMCA with her best friend Sharon. She was a twirler with the Anderson Pirates and still remembers their state fair performance and costumes.

She carried on those traditions with her own daughters, Lynne, who lives in Stone Oak, and Leslie, a teacher in North Texas. She shares a close relationship with her girls and the five grandchildren with whom she has been blessed.

When her girls were small, Kerness supported the family doing clerical work as a Kelly Girl temporary worker. She and Victor met later in life and had 14 happy years together despite their different backgrounds. Kerness loved to surprise Victor with her spontaneity and zest for life and adventure.

She describes herself as a born-again Christian who attends Cornerstone Church. She likes Pastor Hagee because “he tells it like it is,” and is grateful the church is located so close to her home in Independence Hill.