

BACKGROUND ON LAURIE HOIRUP'S MEMOIR, *I CAN DANCE: MY LIFE WITH A DISABILITY*

I became acquainted with Laurie Hoirup at meetings of the California Writers Club and of Northern California Publishers & Authors. I soon realized that, despite her reliance on a wheelchair for mobility and need for assistance with physical tasks, I was increasingly seeing Laurie's *abilities* rather than her *disabilities*. That recognition piqued my interest in reading, and soon in publishing, her memoir of life with a disability.

Laurie's narrative, titled *I Can Dance* for reasons that become clear in the book, is frank, intimate, detailed, and revealing. If it were not for the lifelong physical disability that is a continuing thread in the story, the memoir would be that of a more-or-less typical product of the 1950s and 1960s. Family, friends, schooling, relocations, romances, risk-taking, employment, and a whole range of choices, from the foolish and impulsive to the prudent and well planned, through life to parenthood and grandparenthood — all of this is the stuff of which life is made in varying proportions for all of us.

Laurie's story unfolds alongside a disabling muscle disease recognized at about one year of age and progressing with a changing set of diagnoses over the years, ultimately found to be spinal muscular atrophy (SMA), a form of muscular dystrophy. A different person with different family and friends might have had very different outcomes. Laurie documents her outcomes and how she reached them. A few themes emerge along the journey, including the essential role of supportive family and friends and the equally essential role of *determination* to pursue goals.

People often make assumptions about individuals who have obvious disabilities. To illustrate, Laurie told me about dinner at a restaurant with her husband, JR. The food server took JR.'s order, and then, nodding toward Laurie and turning back to JR., asked *him*, "And what will *she* have?" JR., bristling, advised the server, "You can ask her. She'll tell you what she wants. She has a Master's degree and knows her own mind." Apparently it came as a surprise to the server that a person with a severe physical disability could pick from a menu as well as anyone else, even if she used a wheelchair and could not handle a fork for herself.

In another telling incident, a literary agent to whom Laurie spoke about her manuscript immediately turned her away, saying, "*We don't do misery memoirs.*" The agent, probably reflecting an industry-wide view, assumes that disability equals misery. *I Can Dance: My Life with a Disability* will disabuse readers (including that agent, I hope) of that assumption, as Laurie is clearly not miserable. She is in fact one of the *least* miserable people I know.

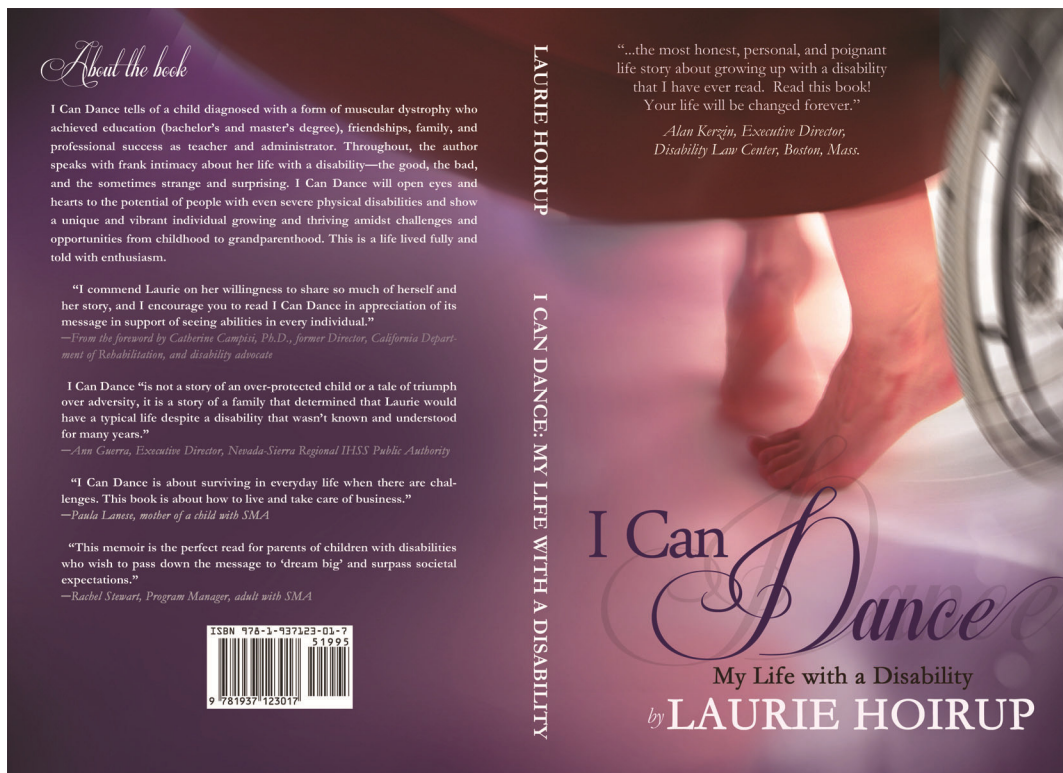
Laurie, like everyone else, has suffered through periods of misery — illness, injury, marital problems — as well as challenges of managing a household, the ups and downs of education, overseeing the care and education of children, job-hunting and employment, and the other obligations and occasional nuisances of life. But as Laurie points out, a sense of humor goes a long way in dealing with life's problems and with its problematic people.

"Laurie's Legacy," as revealed in *I Can Dance*, encompasses the message that a disability does not invalidate the person. Laurie's legacy also encompasses the message that family,

friends, teachers, employers, and healthcare providers need to understand that a disability must not be allowed to mask abilities. Perhaps most important, the legacy as encompassed in *I Can Dance* is that a person with a disability is first and foremost a *person*, with all that implies about capacities for relationships and accomplishments and the need for opportunities, friendship, and intimacy and the potential to be a vibrant and fulfilled individual.

It is my hope that Laurie Hoirup's memoir, *I Can Dance: My Life with a Disability*, will open eyes while introducing readers to a remarkable individual and her path to personal and professional accomplishment.

—Ken Umbach, publisher



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