

Dance for Parkinson's Disease Teacher-Training Workshop

by *Lee Erica Elder*



David Leventhal (right) shows a student a simple movement.

In 2001 Olie Westheimer, executive director of Brooklyn Parkinson Group, began brainstorming how dance could benefit Parkinson's disease patients. Mainly, how could it bring grace and control to their daily movement? She approached the Brooklyn-based modern dance company Mark Morris Dance Group about offering studio space, teachers and a musician for a specialized dance class, Dance for Parkinson's Disease. David Leventhal and John Heginbotham, both 10-year veteran MMDG company members, jumped on board to teach the monthly Dance for PD class and work with Westheimer to develop a unique curriculum. Within two years classes became weekly, and MMDG faculty member Misty Owens, a professional tap dancer, joined the class.

The results have been positive: Leventhal has witnessed many participants become better dancers and more expressive in their movement. Dancing also helps Parkinson's sufferers gain confidence, allowing them to feel liberated from the disease's constraints, and it teaches them to use their brains and bodies to move more gracefully. The Dance for PD class model has been replicated throughout the United States, in London and in Toronto, Canada. And due to the method's growing success, MMDG and BPG started offering a customizable teacher-training component in 2006 to help teachers gain deeper understanding of the disease and how dance can improve Parkinson's sufferers' lives.

Dance for PD teachers-in-training work with facilitators to create a course syllabus that follows the class' structure but expands upon it to fit the needs of each teacher's physically challenged students. "Workshops are scheduled in response to demand, and in response to specific program expansion needs," says Leventhal. "For certain groups, we design a general workshop that introduces them to our core philosophies and methods, and it is designed to be the first of several training sessions that get progressively more detailed. For other teachers, we offer a specific course with a syllabus based on the principles and classic exercises that form the backbone of our class."

Along with detailed information sessions to introduce core methods and exercises, teachers will observe class to view warm-up and across-the-floor routines that incorporate various style elements, including ballet, tap, modern, flamenco, musical theater, folk, salsa and Mark Morris repertory, set to energizing live music. Participants will also have access to medical lectures on basic background information, along with expert Q&As featuring several New York-based Parkinson's neurologists. Trainees even get the opportunity to teach a Parkinson's class. "We offer a hands-on practicum as part of every workshop," says Leventhal, adding that this allows the teachers-in-training to get immediate feedback about their new material and overall teaching style. But perhaps most valuable, teachers get the opportunity to connect with colleagues to exchange ideas and contacts, thereby spreading the word about using dance as a teaching tool for Parkinson's patients and other movement-challenged populations. **DT**