DANCE FOR PD℠

The Mark Morris Dance Group (MMDG) and Brooklyn Parkinson Group (BPG) started offering free dance classes for people with Parkinson's in 2001. Since then, through the expanded Dance for PD℠ program, MMDG and BPG have helped other organizations and individuals replicate dance classes based on the original model for people with Parkinson's in more than 40 communities around the world, including Oakland, Berkeley, Sunnyvale, and San Francisco. An introductory training workshop will be held in Davis at the Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts on September 27th. In addition to offering weekly classes for more than 60 people with Parkinson's, their spouses, caregivers, and friends, MMDG/BPG has trained more than 70 teachers in the Dance for PD℠ method, and MMDG regularly offers Dance for PD℠ classes as part of its touring outreach program in cities where the company performs. Olie Westheimer, the executive director of BPG and the visionary behind the class, and David Leventhal, a dancer with MMDG and one of the founding teachers of the class, spoke with the Park Bench about the program.

Why are dance classes good for people with PD?

OW: In order to dance, dancers use inputs from the environment and mental strategies to guide, control, and learn movements. For persons with PD, use of these inputs and strategies helps regenerate the ability to move, promoting a sense of control over physical activity that is lost in PD. Dancers who teach Dance for PD classes focus on aesthetic goals, not on movement limitations. They impart knowledge about how to dance in a safe, social, and pleasing environment, with the expectation that their students can and want to learn. They share the joy of dance. Learning, striving to move beautifully and having a good time are good for persons with PD and everyone else.

What makes the classes fun?

DL: While these classes are rigorous—the content is specific and the class is a real dance class—we emphasize exploration and expression, not perfection, and we encourage people to modify things that don't feel good. Everyone dances together so there is a strong camaraderie in the class. The fun comes from the sense of achieving something beautiful, graceful, and musical in a supportive group setting. We try to guide people away from physical limitations and toward physical possibilities.

For more information about the introductory training workshop, the program and class locations, please go to www.danceforparkinsons.org or call 646-450-DFPD (3373). Watch The Park Bench for more information about area groups.