



Pas de Deux With Parkinson's

How dance teachers can help in the battle against a degenerative disease

By Jennifer Kaplan

The people stepping out of the elevator at Maryland Youth Ballet in Silver Spring may not look much like dancers. They come into the second-floor studio awkwardly shuffling, legs stiff, limbs trembling; some use walkers or even wheelchairs. Moving slowly, arrhythmically, for them simply walking is a chore. Their bodies rigid and inflexible, they struggle—many mightily—to accomplish the simplest physical task. And yet, an hour later these 20 or so people leave the studio feeling like the lithe, limber dancers they see all around them, readying themselves for their after-school classes.

The adults have just completed a free weekly Dance for PD class, an ongoing program for people with Parkinson's disease. A continuing collaboration between Bowen McCauley Dance and the Parkinson Foundation of the National Capital Area—a chapter of the National



ABOVE: Lucy Bowen McCauley (second from left) and other Dance for PD teachers have backgrounds in varied dance styles as well as yoga and Pilates. TOP: McCauley (center, in blue shirt) was drawn to the Dance with PD program by the challenge of learning more about Parkinson's disease.

All photos by John McCauley



A Dance for PD class gave a moving performance at The Kennedy Center in 2009.

Parkinson's Foundation—the program is modeled on one begun in 2001 by the Mark Morris Dance Group to help assuage the symptoms of Parkinson's, a chronic, progressive disease of the central nervous system that impairs movement.

Since 2005, the program has expanded to more than 50 at the instigation of Olie Westheimer of the Brooklyn Parkinson Group, with direction from Mark Morris Dance Group dancer John Heginbotham, former troupe member David Leventhal, and teacher Misty Owens. As of early 2011 there were at least a dozen more Dance for PD programs in development as the three lead facilitators have begun training experienced dance teachers—like Lucy Bowen McCauley, a dancer and choreographer based in Arlington, Virginia—in their methods.

Parkinson's affects nearly one million people in the United States alone. While neither a cause nor a cure has yet been found, it appears—primarily through anecdotal evidence—that dance classes help alleviate symptoms and promote a stronger sense of well-being and physical agility among those who struggle with the disease.

Phyllis Richman joined a Dance for

PD class at Maryland Youth Ballet at the urging of friends in her Parkinson's support group. Taught by McCauley or her professional company dancers, the class differs little from an adult beginner ballet or modern-dance class, save for the initial warm-up, which participants take seated in chairs, and the round-robin-like memory games, where each in turn states his or her name and offers up a movement, which builds to create an accumulation dance. Later, the class moves to the barre and then across the floor (if participants can) like a regular dance class. The teacher suggests ways to alter movement and simplify it as needed, and students are encouraged to work at their own level. Some use the barre while others remain in wheelchairs; if needed, a teacher or assistant might hold a dancer's hand.

Richman, a novelist and former restaurant critic for *The Washington Post*, was diagnosed more than a decade ago. She's been taking the class for more than two years and has noticed increased mobility, reduced tremors, better balance, and a general sense of well-being. "When I leave the class, for a few hours I don't feel like I have Parkinson's," she says.

And that's the point, David

Leventhal says. "When they're in the class they feel like they don't have to think about Parkinson's. They're really there to learn—we break it down as we would for any beginning dancers. We see all of them as dancers. When they come into the Mark Morris Dance Studio, they feel like dancers."

While he stills tours occasionally with the company, which he joined in 1997, Leventhal oversees the MMDG's Dance for PD training program, offering intensive sessions to instruct dance teachers of any genre and style in the intricacies of working with people who have Parkinson's. During a decade of interacting with this population, Leventhal and his colleagues have learned a great deal about what works and what doesn't, what's safe and what should be avoided. They've done so by listening carefully to their students, observing, and learning about the disease and the research done by the Brooklyn Parkinson Group, which co-founded and provides support for the program.

Leventhal is clear from the outset that Parkinson's is a degenerative disease: "It never gets better. It can stay the same or it can get worse." And yet he has seen some students who have attended the Dance for PD classes for

many years whose motor skills have improved. "In terms of their dance training, almost all of them have gotten more confident, more graceful in their dancing," he says. "They become quicker learners, pick up combinations much faster. There is a core group of people who are very confident now about what they're doing."

Ultimately, even with the encroaching symptoms of the disease, those with Parkinson's become better dancers. "I consider all of them dancers at various stages of training," Leventhal says. "Not only do they have a condition that makes it hard to move, but they're beginners at dancing, which can be great because they're very open to learning how to dance."

McCauley signed on to teach Dance for PD soon after MMDG began offering teacher training. A

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dancer, choreographer, and educator for more than two decades, McCauley directs and choreographs for her own company in the DC region. Last fall she was recognized for excellence in dance education with a MetroDC Dance Award, a program that honors professionals who have made important contributions to dance.

Long an admirer of Morris' choreography, McCauley also seeks challenges, so signing on for Dance

for PD training was a no-brainer. In the past she worked with seniors and children, and she has danced herself through a serious heart condition that requires her to use a pacemaker-like device that emits an alarm when her heart slows or is in danger of stopping.

McCauley attributes her empathy for her PD students and the challenges they face to her own health issues. "I did not go in with the attitude that I could do this because of my extensive teaching background," she says. "I went specifically because I didn't know this population. I didn't feel like I had a really good knowledge of Parkinson's disease and the challenges of being a newbie [working] with Parkinson's disease."

Leventhal notes that the best candidates for the training program are experienced and passionate dance teachers, like McCauley. "[Their experience] can be in any style and doesn't have to be in the background that we have" at Mark Morris' studio, he says. "We want people who are excited about bringing their style of movement to this population, presenting it clearly, energetically, and with a sense of joy."

Trainees work in any genre, from ballet to tap, jazz to African, modern, and world forms; even yoga and Pilates instructors have signed on. "We need teachers who know their stuff and can pass it on in an accessible and enjoyable way," Leventhal says, adding that professional dancers and choreographers bring their artistry to the teaching environment by tapping into their students' imaginations with descriptive explanations and continuing use of metaphor.

"The class utilizes ideas that the imagination and the use of imagery can help people move," Leventhal explains. "Just saying, 'Lift your arm,' is not enough. You have to give

"When you turn on the music and use rhythm and image...it really does make a difference," says McCauley (left, foreground).



people a sense that they can lift their arm like a giant bird flapping in the breeze. We try to evoke or stimulate the imagination as much as we can because we know it can serve the dance student in any setting, but especially with this group."

McCauley, too, observes that while gym-like exercises are helpful to Parkinson's patients, dance provides something more: "Exercise has its purpose, but when you turn on the music and use rhythm and image—make it dance—it really does make a difference." And while that distinction has yet to be explained, Leventhal notes that studies are underway by medical scientists who are trying to determine what dance does that's different from pure exercise activities.

The training program is typically held over a weekend for 16 to 20 hours at the MMDG Brooklyn studios. It consists of three levels of workshops: an introductory course for first-time teachers of dancers with PD; a professional development session for more experienced instructors; and, finally, a certification program, which is still in development. The introductory workshop includes six modules featuring demo and practicum classes, instruction on safety concerns, panels about what to expect, advice on how to design and structure classes, and a lecture by a neurology professional.

Leventhal says, "We don't pretend that we're treating people medically, and we're not doing dance therapy, but we do provide an expert who can answer the more clinical side of the questions." Even the most experienced

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teacher may have little idea of how to get a class going for this population, so Leventhal and the BPC also include a discussion on how to initiate a class and connect with the PD community in each locale.

For teachers who have been working with the Parkinson's population, returning for a daylong workshop serves as inservice and refresher training. "We provide a workshop and forum for them to return and share ideas, best practices, and challenges they've faced," Leventhal says. Additionally, when the Mark Morris company is on tour, Leventhal often has opportunities to meet with program graduates in their home cities. "We'll generally have a follow-up development session in cities where classes have started," he says. "A lot of those are connected

"When I leave the class, for a few hours I don't feel like I have Parkinson's." —Phyllis Richman, Dance for PD student

with the company's touring outreach. When we go back to Seattle, where we trained a couple of teachers last year, we'll have a professional development workshop."

Leventhal explains that the majority of Dance for PD classes are offered at no charge, frequently through a partnership with the local Parkinson's foundation and pro bono work by the dance teacher or company. "That is our model and it's still our ideal," he says, "but we realize that not every organization is able to offer this class free of charge. We'd rather have this class available for a nominal charge

than have no class at all."

Programs in Chicago, Seattle, San Francisco, Houston, Silver Spring, and London, often considered charter or network affiliates, all do not charge for classes, receiving support from private funders and local Parkinson's groups. McCauley says the funding she receives covers studio rental and payment for herself and a second teacher. The administrative demands of running the program and the sample classes she offers annually to local Parkinson's support groups are all unfunded. "I call it breaking even," she says, "but we don't account for those extra admin hours."

"We want to keep the classes free of charge," Leventhal says, "because Parkinson's can have quite a detrimental effect on a person's finances. In addition to all the expenses—medicine, doctor's visits, transportation, which is more expensive when you can't take buses and trains—you often find yourself in a situation where you can't do your work anymore. We understand the pressure. We really encourage teachers to try to find a way to offer the class either for free, at minimal charge, or suggested donation."

For teachers or studio owners looking to add a Dance for PD class to their schedules, Leventhal is enthusiastic about the opportunities. The classes are offered most often during midday hours, when dance studios are not as busy as at other times of the day. But he cautions that Dance for PD is not meant to serve as another income stream. "There are a lot of really good reasons to do this kind of class, but making money is not one of them. You can do it in a way where you won't lose money," he notes, adding, "In terms of community engagement and reaching out to a different clientele, there are huge benefits for that in terms of how your studio is engaged in the community."

More information on Dance for PD classes and the training program can be found at danceforparkinsons.org. ♦

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