

Aspiring dancers learn their moves

Parkinson's patients try new kind of therapy



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By Dave Eisenstadter Sentinel Staff | [0 comments](#)

Rebecca A. Midler turns on the music and instructs her dance students to take turns posing in the center of the room. Some hold their poses on one leg; others lean way over, stretching their arms out.

What one notices right away is most of her students are elderly; what one doesn't necessarily see is that nearly all of them have been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, a brain disorder that leads to shaking and difficulty with movement, balance and coordination.

No cure exists for the chronic, progressive disease; treatment involves treating its symptoms.

Since February, Midler has instructed or co-instructed a monthly dance class called "Dancing with Parkinson's" at Cheshire Medical Center/Dartmouth-Hitchcock Keene.

In part the class is therapy, but Midler approaches it like dance instruction.

Midler works with participants on technique, walking them through breathing exercises, torso and abdomen strengthening and different movements with their arms and legs to promote balance.

“For most of them, dance is something completely new,” Midler says. “They are so brave coming to a movement class; I really admire my students.”

Parkinson’s is not contagious, but Midler’s warmth and excitement for movement are. Students smile and laugh during the class.

Patti R. Szydlo, 77, of Peterborough attends the class to help with her balance. She likes that she has to work to remember the instructions.

“Anything that piques your mind to working in a different way is good for you,” she says.

Szydlo was diagnosed with Parkinson’s disease eight years ago, and says she has been participating in the dance class since it began in February. Her husband Stan, who does not have Parkinson’s, joins her.

Szydlo experiences tremors — shaking in the hands and feet — and now has trouble with knowing her right side from her left side. The disease has slowed her down, too.

“I took dancing lessons for eight years and was very good at what I did,” Szydlo says. “It absolutely fascinates me that I can’t do it now. I was a great swimmer, but I sink now; my legs don’t kick fast enough.”

Kathleen E. Michel, 61, of Saxtons River, Vt., got the dance started. Diagnosed two-and-a-half years ago, Michel says the news was hard to take.

“I was expecting that it could be Parkinson’s when I started having the symptoms, but you never want to get a diagnosis like that,” Michel says.

Michel retired from her job as a school librarian because of the disease, but she says one positive effect is she has been exercising more than ever.

The dance class is included in that, but it’s also fun, she says. She enjoys the music, the movement and feeling the rhythm.

“Music is important, and it’s really great for people with Parkinson’s,” Michel says. “It touches a different part of your brain and gets you going.”

Midler received training to teach the class in Brooklyn, N.Y., late last year from the Mark Morris Dance Group. There are times students have felt frustrated at not being able to complete the moves, but Midler and the class reassure those students and soon enough they get back on their feet, Midler says. Everything Midler does with her students can be done while sitting in a chair.

Midler’s goal is just to get students to come and participate in movement.

“When you’re connecting to any aspect of dance it feels good,” Midler says. “You’re not worrying about any type of pain or anything someone might worry about. You have an hour and a half to enjoy being alive and being able to move.”

Toward the end of the class, Midler puts on a slow piano piece by Yann Tiersen. She asks the class members to picture themselves underwater, and leads them through slow arm and leg movements in time with the music. The moment is so beautiful, Michel gets choked up, she says. Midler is similarly affected.

“It almost left tears in my eyes. They were not questioning what they were doing; they were having a great time. It’s wonderful.”

The class takes place the first Monday of the month from 10:30-11:45 a.m. For more information, contact Michel at starbooks06@yahoo.com.

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