

TULSA WORLD

Dance class beneficial to Parkinson's patients

By DAVID HARPER World Staff Writer
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James Lee was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease about five years ago.

"It kind of snuck in," the 71-year-old Tulsan recalled Saturday.

Parkinson's involves a loss of brain cells controlling movement. Besides tremors, it can cause rigid walking, slowed speech and sometimes dementia.

Lee's wife, Melanie, said her husband attends exercise classes three times a week that are meant to keep him active and lessen the effects of the disease.



Dance instructor John Heginbotham, from the Mark Morris Dance Group, leads a group of Parkinson's patients and their supporters at The Dance Pointe on Saturday.
CORY YOUNG / Tulsa World

But when the couple heard that members of the Mark Morris Dance Group would be leading a class designed for Parkinson's patients Saturday at The Dance Pointe, they made sure to attend.

"It's worth a try," Melanie Lee said. "Anything to keep him walking, talking and upright."

The New York-based Mark Morris Dance Group and the Brooklyn Parkinson Group started offering free dance classes for people with the disease in 2001. Since then, the program has blossomed in the United States and beyond.

The premise is that professionally trained dancers are movement experts whose knowledge is useful to people with the disease. The classes are designed to engage the participants' minds and bodies and create an enjoyable, social environment that emphasizes dancing.

Saturday's class was led by John Heginbotham and Sam Black, who were in Tulsa in connection with the Mark Morris Dance Group's performances at the Performing Arts Center on Friday and Saturday nights.

Choregus Productions director Ken Tracy, whose group presented the group's Tulsa shows, said his organization was "delighted" that the New York troupe was reaching out to the community in this fashion during its Tulsa stop.

Parkinson's disease affects about 1 million people nationwide, 6 million globally, according to the National Parkinson's Foundation.

Jenny Johnson, Oklahoma and Kansas coordinator for the American Parkinson Disease Association, estimated Saturday that about 16,000 Oklahomans have the disease.

Neither Heginbotham nor Black said they had known anyone with Parkinson's before joining the troupe, but Heginbotham said they have now met hundreds of patients who are coping with the disease.

Heginbotham said he finds working with Parkinson's patients "very rewarding. I love being part of these classes."

Saturday's class began with the patients seated in folding chairs and following the rhythmic arm and leg movements demonstrated by Heginbotham and Black. Eventually, those patients who could rise to their feet engaged in similar activities while standing.

Almost invariably, the loved ones and caregivers who had accompanied the patients also participated in Saturday's program.

Also joining in was Missie Moore, who leads "Power over Parkinson's" exercise classes at University Village. She said that staying physically active is vital for people with the disease. Otherwise, she said they'll "set up like cement" as the disease progresses.

"I can give them the tools to work with, but they have to do the work," said Moore, a certified exercise instructor.

For those with Parkinson's, even the simplest tasks can be daunting. Joseph Goetz, 76, said just getting out of a car can be challenging for him.

Goetz said he was diagnosed with the disease about 15 years ago. His wife, Jeanette, said although her husband gets at least 30 minutes of exercise per day, Saturday's dance program was a unique opportunity.

"What a gift," she said.