

Parkinson's disease patients find rare physical freedom in Berkeley-based dance classes

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In a dance studio deep in Berkeley's Julia Morgan Center for the Arts, Carol Bryan and Claudia Johnson perform a bittersweet duet.

The women sway and reach, as if to embrace, then fling one arm high and twist their torsos to end side by side, gazing into each other's eyes and smiling gently.

They are dancers, and like ballerinas their work in the studio is filled with danger, pain, passion, grace and beauty.

Bryan, of Walnut Creek, and Johnson, a resident of Orinda, have Parkinson's disease, a degenerative disorder affecting the central nervous system that causes motor skill and speech disturbances.

Both make the arduous journey through the Caldecott Tunnel three times a month to attend Dance for Parkinson's, a free movement program directed by Susan Weber, a former member of the Lar Lubovitch Company.

Weber's connection through the dance world's intricate weave allows her to bring Mark Morris Dance Group's innovative program to the Berkeley Ballet Theatre, where she is the associate artistic director.

Dance for PD, fully funded by PD Active, an advocacy group founded to support ongoing community DFPD classes, pairs professional dancers with Parkinson's patients. The emphasis is on dancing, rather than therapy; accompanied at all times by live music, the classes unlock the mysterious neurological mixup that leaves PD sufferers with impaired balance, rigidity, slow muscle responses and, often, depression.

On this day in early June, Kate Mitchell co-leads the class with Weber. Mitchell, gloriously long-limbed and elegant, danced professionally with New York's CoDanceCo and received her DFPD training two years ago.

Gathered in a circle of chairs, 12 students curl and spiral their torsos as they follow Mitchell's movements. Changing levels and breathing as a group, their bodies transition from disparate, individual anomalies to a silent, peaceful ensemble.

The Name Game, during which each dancer calls out his or her name, accompanied by a gesture, adds a lighthearted moment. Or perhaps it's the jazz riff, played with rollicking spirit by pianist Chris Houston, that causes Johnson to lift an arm and leg in perfect symmetry and sing "Claudia!" in sparkling tones.

Shaking is next, with a thrumming rhythm from the piano. These men and women, who moments before walked with complete concentration and deliberate steps into the room, are miraculously stamping,



kicking and shaking their limbs with fierce abandon.

Mitchell and Weber, although delicate in their choice of words, are demanding. There's clarification and correction as Weber says, "We're making our feet intelligent and expressive," and Mitchell instructs the class to rise from their chairs and incline forward, like Olympic ski jumpers.



At the ballet barre, the music swells as heels lift higher and arms carve enormous arcs through the air. Johnson loosens her grip on the support; Bryan, her balance challenged, lifts her chin and soldiers on, despite the fear.

Weber describes a dance, Cloven Kingdom, created by renowned choreographer Paul Taylor, before introducing the dance's crablike skitters and caveman rock pounding. The class ends with a mirroring exercise, where students follow

each other's improvised movements. It's a magical moment from which burst smiles, hearty laughter and exquisite, tender partnerships.

After class, Bryan and Johnson sit for an interview.

"I felt like I was dragging my feet through wet cement," Johnson describes, about the first symptoms she noticed two years ago. "It made me nervous to drive; the tunnel seemed smaller and the car bigger."

She finds it difficult to define the disease to others, especially because diminishing energy and restricted movement are a part of both aging and Parkinson's.

Bryan learned she had the disease 13 years ago, when she was 50. A former occupational therapist who loved to travel, she admits to having mixed feelings.

"I'm angry, although I've actually never said it until now. And it's hard on my husband," she begins.

Although she had treated Parkinson's patients, Bryan had an unexpected discovery when she became one herself.

"Depression is one of the symptoms. Not depression because you have Parkinson's, not as a result, but as a symptom," she emphasizes.

In addition to a drop in mood, Bryan noticed other difficulties.

"The problems affected my conversations: people had to wait for me to express myself. I'd have an idea and by the time I got to speak it, I'd have forgotten," she says.

For Johnson, Dance for PD is the ironic fulfillment of a childhood dream.

"I was raised on movies where everyone danced," she recalls, grateful that the class has made her able to bend and move her torso with more ease.

"No more slogging through concrete," she jokes. "I call this my hour of joy. I find my attitude and the stresses of life [are] diminished by the movement."

Bryan refers to the trip from Walnut Creek to Berkeley as "a trick," but gets a thrill out of watching her fellow dancers. She's not without happiness, she insists, but has learned to look for it in small doses: while eating ice cream, or gathering with friends.

"There's things I can't do -- so I go to something that isn't perfect, but I get something out of it," Bryan says, chin thrust forward in a gesture that could be her signature movement.

Mitchell, reflecting on the awareness she has gained from her students, says, "I've learned it's a struggle every day. And that one of the most important things about having a disability is retaining your dignity. Someone who has instability in his or her body has dancing inside. Dance for PD is not about precision or correctness, it's about finding joy."

DANCE FOR PD

WHERE: Julia Morgan Center for the Arts, 2640 College Ave., Berkeley

WHEN: First, third and fifth Wednesdays, 11:15 a.m.-12:30 p.m.

INFORMATION: E-mail dance@pdactive.org or call 510-479-6119