

Rye dance class offers freedom of movement to Parkinson's patients

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RYE — Upbeat Latin music filled the room at the Rye Arts Center as participants in a recent class sashayed across the floor.

"Get that Latin spice going through your body," instructor Jonathon Riedel told his students with a smile as they rotated their arms in graceful circles.

The students were not just there to pick up new moves. As patients with Parkinson's disease, the class also offered them an opportunity to learn from professionally trained dancers about stretching, strengthening muscles and enhancing their physical awareness and grace through modern, ballet and folk dance forms.

The class — called Dance for Parkinson's Disease — is part of a groundbreaking movement that originated at the Mark Morris Dance Center in Brooklyn.

"The class was terrific. I've taken physical therapy for Parkinson's disease, and this is much better," Dr. Irwin Rifkin of Rye Brook said after participating in the introductory class. "You get a feeling of accomplishment, and it opens up all of your muscles. You feel relaxed."

Parkinson's disease is a disorder of the brain that leads to tremors and difficulty with walking, movement and coordination. There is no known cure, but certain medicines and treatments can help control symptoms.

The idea to bring the class to the arts center came from a member who has Parkinson's disease and had heard about the program from David Leventhal, one of the program's founders. This is the first time the growing program, which exists in more than 40 communities in the United States and Europe, has been offered in Westchester County.

"I can't even tell you what a big day this is for us," said Peggy Hill, the center's executive director.

The arts center's instructors were specially trained at the Mark Morris Dance Center under Leventhal.

"We did a full day workshop with them," said one of the instructors, former Rye resident Cara Milo, who has been studying classical ballet since she was 5. "It was really great because we actually got to watch a (Parkinson's dance) class there."

Riedel's father was diagnosed with mild Parkinson's 10 years ago. Still, the former Rye resident said he would have taught the class even without the personal connection. "I've taught every age and every level of dancer. I really just love working with people willing to move," he said.

For the first half-hour of the introductory class, the eight participants did dance exercises while seated in their chairs, and then they did standing exercises and danced across the floor for the remaining 45 minutes. The instructors explained the dance moves in terms beginners could understand, relating certain moves to an action like painting on a canvas, screwing in a light bulb or wringing out a rag. They also incorporated and explained dance terms, like "plie" and "tendu."

Riedel's favorite part of teaching the Parkinson's class is that it allows the participants to take on different styles and play different characters.

"You know you're successful when you see the students (dance) and you see their eyes light up. ... You've transferred your creativity and joy to them," he said.