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Dance for Parkinson's Disease classes in Bay Area

For those with degenerative illness, classes can aid coordination

Mary Ellen Hunt
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Like many a good dance teacher, Susan Weber's voice exudes an authoritative calm as she demonstrates an exercise for a ring of dancers in City Ballet's studios in San Francisco. What's different about this class is that everyone is sitting in chairs as their arms sweep out circles and their upper bodies spiral in gentle warm-up routines.

Weber and colleague Megan Low, a former dancer with San Francisco Ballet, are teaching their monthly San Francisco class called Dance for Parkinson's Disease. It offers people diagnosed with the degenerative neurological disease a rigorous physical workout that strengthens and helps coordinate muscles, but in a low-pressure situation, with no experience required.

Each student does as much of the 75-minute class as they feel comfortable with. For some, the chair work is enough. Others continue with barre work or combinations across the floor. Almost magically, as class gets under way, the tremors in an arm seem to ease, a jittering hand slows down and the dancers begin to move with practiced smoothness through the exercises.

Weber, who has taught the class for more than six years, has a very personal take on its benefits - her father lived with Parkinson's for 20 years.

"My dad loved to do social dance," she says. "I know in my gut if something like this had been available to him, he would have been so happy. So I'm motivated not just by the tremendous joy that this class releases in teachers and students alike, but also by what it would have meant to my father."



Susan Weber leads the group of dancers at the City Ballet Studios on Thursday Dec. 5, 2013, in San Francisco, Ca. Susan Weber, associate director of Berkeley Ballet and former dancer conducts regular dance classes for people with Parkinson's Disease, using principles and techniques of dance to strengthen and coordinated their muscles through dance

Weber teaches a weekly class in Berkeley as well as this monthly San Francisco class. Both are designed for anyone at any stage of Parkinson's and caregivers and family members are encouraged to take part.

A Southern California native, Weber started dancing at the age of 5. After graduating from UCLA, she joined Lar Lubovitch's company in New York, where she danced for five years. When she and her husband - from whom she is now divorced - left New York, she quit dancing to raise a family, eventually landing in Walnut Creek. For a decade, she concentrated on family life. She took former ballet star Sally Streets' class at Berkeley Ballet Theatre, where she began teaching and then became associate artistic director.

Weber also stayed in touch with famed choreographer Mark Morris, whom she met through the Lubovitch company, and she remains his trusted rehearsal assistant whenever he stages his work for San Francisco Ballet.

Affiliated programs

The Dance for Parkinson's Disease program was developed by two Mark Morris Dance Group members, David Leventhal and John Heginbotham, under the company's auspices in 2001. Since then, more than 100 affiliated programs have been started around the world. Weber was one of the first to bring Dance for Parkinson's Disease to the Bay Area in 2007.

"The central, crucial philosophical core is that it's a dance class," says Weber, who explains that teachers have adapted the

model to fit a wide range of disciplines, from tap to modern, ballet to Bollywood. "It is not therapy. It's meant to fulfill an expressive need, and foster well-being and joy. People who have (Parkinson's) wind up being defined by the disease a lot - in doctors' offices, psychologist studies. This is not the place for that. This is a dance class."

"Susan is incredibly perceptive, kind, meticulous and imaginative," says Mark Morris. "She has a vast knowledge of the human mind and body through her various experiences as dancer, yogini, alert observer of human behavior, mother, daughter and friend. Her diligence and joy are just what's needed" in the Dance for Parkinson's Disease classes.

The class has meant a lot to Ernie Scosseria, who has taken Weber's Wednesday class in Berkeley for more than two years. Diagnosed 14 years ago, he credits dancing with slowing the progression of his disease.

'You have to exercise'

With Parkinson's, he says, "if you stop moving, you really stop moving."

"If you want to keep what mobility you have, you have to exercise. In Susan's class, you keep moving, testing to see what you can or can't do, and that is important."

Weber takes the students through an exercise slightly reminiscent of Steve Martin's funky "King Tut." They swing their arms and tap their heels in a stylized strut, but the coordination is tricky.

"That's just like when you walk naturally," says one dancer.

"Yes!" Weber says, adding with a grin, "But you know, even the most accomplished professional dancers have trouble with this. When you tell someone they have to coordinate their feet and arms, suddenly they walk funny."

She steps unnaturally, swinging her left foot and left arm out at the same time, and her students laugh.

The symptoms of Parkinson's disease often include uncontrolled tremors or frozen uncooperative muscles. Dance, which consciously connects mind and body, is a perfect vehicle for coaxing refined movement from the limbs, improving coordination and balance. Then too, the class offers a social support system.

Parkinson's disease "can be isolating, particularly when you have really bad symptoms," says Scosseria. "It can make it difficult to speak - you wind up going places and standing around like a big, dumb statue. When you're in the dance class though, all that doesn't matter."

Learn more

Dance classes for Parkinson's disease patients are offered in San Francisco, Berkeley, Oakland, San Rafael and Sunnyvale. For more information: PD Active: [\(510\) 479-6119](tel:5104796119), info@pdactive.org, www.pdactive.wordpress.com. PDSF Network: [\(415\) 285-7377](tel:4152857377), pdsfnetwork@gmail.com.

Mary Ellen Hunt is a freelance writer in San Francisco. E-mail: datebookletters@sfchronicle.com