

Dance for Parkinson's gives patients 'medicine for the soul'

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Kate Kuper, visiting lecturer in the dance department, leads a session of the Dance for Parkinson's Disease class inside the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts on Friday. Kuper said patients "forget about having Parkinson's" when they dance at the class.

impartial movements and even a lack of balance. But for every patient, the symptoms may be different.

While there is no found cure for Parkinson's, a Brooklyn based dance group called Mark Morris Dance discovered a remedy no doctor can prescribe in a bottle: combining stretching and muscle strengthening techniques to a funky modern dance.

The Mark Morris Dance Group works specifically with Parkinson's patients and teaches professional instructors, like Kuper, an instructor at Dance for Illinois. Kuper is also a visiting dance lecturer at the University. She and her co-instructor Marianne Jarvi choreograph creative dance moves and exercises for their patients, which allow them to control their movements.

"Everybody loves it ... it's fun, creative and expressive," Kuper said.

She and Jarvi start each session with 45-minute seated activities to live piano music, then a short barre series, which is very similar to ballet.

Parkinson's disease patients are dealing with their illness with one rhythmic step at time, dancing away their symptoms monthly at the Krannert Center for Performing Arts.

Every month, for an hour and a half, a group of local Parkinson's patients, which also meets regularly at the Carle Clinic Parkinson's Awareness Group, comes to Krannert for what dance instructor Kate Kuper likes to call a "movement experience" — better known as Dance for Parkinson's Disease.

Parkinson's is neither terminal nor life threatening, but it can take a toll on the body over time. The disease sometimes causes the body to tremor when it's not doing work. It can also cause rigidity,

Following a sequence of patterned circular movements, gentle taps of the feet and a few sways and sweeps into the air to the melody of the live piano music helps the patients warm up their muscles and minds.

"I think it's medicine for the soul. While they're in class, they forget about having Parkinson's disease," Kuper said.

Take 69-year-old Charlotte Brady, for instance. She was diagnosed with Parkinson's four years ago, shortly after retiring from teaching art in the Mahomet school district. She said that while the medications she takes help her with temporary conditions, the dance moves are more efficient for her overall health.

"Being in shape helps my health ... I can't stop the disease, but I can push it off by keeping up with my health," Brady said.

Brady added that she enjoys attending the sessions because she can meet and talk to other people with Parkinson's.

"We all have something in common ... it's good to know you're not alone," Brady said.