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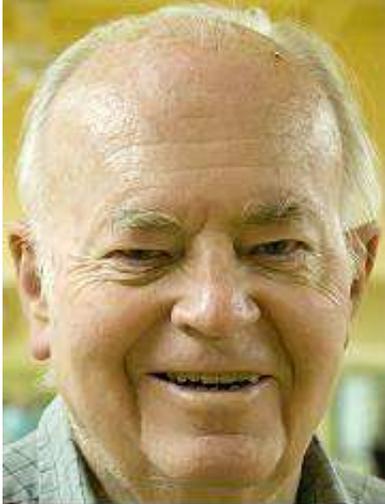
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Getting Back In Step

Parkinson's sufferers build fitness, mobility with dance

By LAURA BOWDEN YANG, Correspondent



Bob and Kathy Heath



Gwen Gerhardt, a dance instructor with Volusia Flagler Family YMCA, dances with Soon Lee of Ormond Beach during a Dance for PD class at the Ormond Beach YMCA recently. (N-J | Laura Bowden Yang)



Instructor Gwen Gerhardt leads Ormond Beach residents Bob Heath and Kathy Heath through a series of dance moves at the recent Dance for PD class at the Ormond Beach YMCA. (N-J | Laura Bowden Yang)

If You Go

WHAT: Dance for PD (Parkinson's disease) is a class blending elements of ballet, Broadway and modern dance, tailored for people with Parkinson's disease. Caregivers are also welcome.

WHEN AND WHERE: Mondays at 1 p.m. at the Port Orange YMCA; 1 p.m. Thursdays at 1 p.m. at the Ormond Beach YMCA.

COST: \$10 for the session for each dancer with Parkinson's disease; free to caregivers.

Although the first series of four-week-long classes is under way in both Ormond Beach and Port Orange, new dancers are welcome to join anytime. Dancers are also welcome to attend classes at both locations at no additional charge.

For more information about local Dance for PD classes, call the Ormond Beach YMCA at [386-673-9622](tel:386-673-9622) or the Port Orange YMCA at 386-760-9622.

Earlier in life, Bob and Kathy Heath enjoyed dancing. She took classes as a child while he learned ballroom basics in eighth grade. But time took a toll on their performances.

Kathy suffered a severed Achilles tendon. Then Bob was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease.

Recently, though, the Ormond Beach couple heard about Dance for PD -- a Brooklyn, N.Y.-based dance program created especially for people with Parkinson's and their caregivers. This month, Dance for PD-trained instructors began offering the class at the Family YMCAs in Ormond Beach and Port Orange, so the Heaths decided to try it out.

"We wanted to do something to improve -- to eliminate the disease if possible. So this is a start," Bob Heath said after the inaugural class in Ormond Beach on March 10.

"It was great for me ... because I'm getting different movements," Kathy Heath said.

Movement is key for people living with Parkinson's disease, according to Vince Kinsler, who serves as the president of the Parkinson Association of Greater Daytona Beach, the organization that spearheaded bringing Dance for PD to Volusia County.

"(People with Parkinson's disease) are now having to think about what would be second nature, as a result of their dopamine levels being abnormal," Kinsler said.

When dopamine levels are too low, the brain doesn't automatically cause a person's body to move when he wants to stand up, walk, or clap his hands. Instead the person has to consciously think about moving each individual body part, which takes a lot of mental and physical effort. That's why practicing moving, especially in a fun setting like the dance class, is so important.

"We do know that this has improved peoples' lives, in particular those with Parkinson's disease -- although today we will be leaving (the) disease at the door," Kinsler told participants as the class began.

And for an hour, that's just what they aimed to do under the guidance of instructors Janelle Neal and Gwen Gerhardt. Reflected in the room's mirrored walls, they tapped their toes in rhythm with the music, stretched their arms to the ceiling and even practiced plies.

"We here are here to dance, so in that dancing, it's going to give our bodies freedom for expression," Neal said as she opened the afternoon with an upbeat mix of Frank Sinatra songs.

New Smyrna Beach resident Bill Beaton danced his way through the class with his wife, Lillian.

"I've had Parkinson's for about 10 years and I've participated in everything they have in the way of activities (for people with Parkinson's), and I thought this would be a good activity," he said after the class concluded to a hearty round of applause from all the participants.

"I thoroughly enjoyed it."

While dancing is a physical activity anyone can enjoy, Kinsler and Neal said the social interaction and happiness found in dance classes are especially important for people with Parkinson's and their caregivers.

"People with Parkinson's also face a lot of isolation," Kinsler said.

Because they lack precise control of their movements, Parkinson's sufferers might not feel comfortable in public, he said. Even worse, other people will sometimes ignore them or treat them as though they can't understand what's going on simply because they don't always move or speak fluidly.

Meanwhile, caregivers face their own isolation due to their sometimes-overwhelming tasks.

"They're the forest in the trees, too. Oftentimes their own health and well-being become at risk because they're so busy focusing on their loved one that, before you know it, the caregiver's going down," Kinsler said.

That's something the Heaths hope to avoid.

"I'm the caregiver, but he's doing better" in the dance class, Kathy Heath said.

The Heaths know, as the instructors stressed, dancing isn't a competition. It isn't about stretching the farthest or moving the fastest. It's an opportunity to work on fitness and mobility -- and, for the Heaths, a chance to dance together once again.

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