



Dancers Move Beyond Parkinson's At Lineage

The Pasadena performing arts center raises the curtain on dance for people with disabilities.

By Ilsa Setziol
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Lineage Performing Arts Center in Pasadena isn't your typical dance studio, where girls in powder pink plié and pirouette their way through an annual production of The Nutcracker. Lineage has a broader vision of dance: The modest venue in Old Pasadena is home to a modern dance company that focuses on raising money for nonprofit organizations. The center is also dedicated to expanding access to the art form to everyone — including people with cancer and Parkinson's disease and kids with Down syndrome, whom it teaches to dance with confidence and artistry. The classes blend creative movement — emphasizing improvisation and expression — with basic modern, ballet and popular dance, along with a bit of Pilates.



Lineage's free Dancing Through Parkinson's classes benefit more than just physical

Lineage's free Dancing With Parkinson's classes benefit more than just physical health. People with Parkinson's and other serious conditions often struggle with depression, especially as their ailments progress. The mental health boost the classes provide is just as important — if not more so — than the boon to their bodies, students say. "It allows us to feel our emotions," says student Mary Ann Moses, 62. "That's what I think is missing when you go to support groups, you don't get the depth."

On a fall afternoon, three women with Parkinson's and a fourth recovering from a stroke step gingerly into Lineage's black-floored, white-walled studio. Two are using walkers and one gets help from an aide. On the dance floor, instructor Michelle Kolb opens up black folding chairs and places them in a circle. Once the dancers are seated, she starts playing Unforgettable (the Nat King and Natalie Cole version) and leads them through a series of stretches. "If you're tired, make your movements smaller," she says.

The Dancing With Parkinson's class is unique in Pasadena but one of several that have sprung up across the country and abroad over the past decade. The program's 1,500-plus students have a neurological disorder that impairs motor function, causing balance problems, tremors, rigidity and general difficulty with movement. People with the disease often live with chronic pain and fatigue.

In today's class, though, nobody looks tired. Student Sandy Horn mimics Kolb, "marching" to the beat in her seat and tapping her feet in a Charleston step. "I always leave light-hearted," Horn says. "No matter how I feel when I go there, I always leave energized."

Next, Kolb directs the dancers to follow her movements. "You've got a basket of flowers," she suggests as she mimes the action. "Now you're picking them and tossing them out." Moses does so with a fluidity you wouldn't expect from someone with Parkinson's. The diminutive blond beams a radiant smile. Every musical phrase animates yet another expression of joy.

Dance has long been a passion for Moses, who lives in South Pasadena. She taught herself social dances in high school by practicing in her closet. Later she studied hula. Moses hadn't been much of a hooper in recent years, though, because her husband prefers surfing. But the opportunity to join a free class was too good to pass up. From the beginning, it was an intensely emotional experience for her. "Listening to the music and doing these dances and seeing how beautifully the instructor conducted herself — being part of that was profoundly moving for me," she says. "I was both relieved and grateful, and, at the same time, sad."

Fortunately, the classes are unofficial support groups as well: Students are so committed to encouraging their peers that they often show up even when they're not well enough to dance themselves. On this day, 48-year-old Trish Low has to stop after just a couple of songs. She'd developed intense nerve pain after her fourth deep brain stimulation-related surgery in 2009. (In DBS, a pacemaker that generates electrical impulses is implanted in the brain.) A former outreach coordinator for the American Parkinson's Disease Association, Low joined the class to "find some joy" in her life. She not only tapped into the joy but also garnered friends and self-confidence. "I keep reassuring myself that I am still doing fine," she says. "To know that I can still shake my booty a little bit, it's good for my soul."

After working in their chairs, the dancers transition to standing positions, using the chair-backs as needed for balance. Then those who can, dance unassisted, or partner with a teaching assistant. The students often choreograph dances by joining together movements they each contribute, typically gestural expressions, like the flower-picking exercise. Today they play a "name game," creating movements to accompany the sound of their names.

Some of the students' best efforts gain a wider audience: Lineage Artistic Director Hilary Thomas has incorporated some of the class' choreography into her own work, and Moses performed a duet with teaching assistant Austin Roy at last year's Lineage gala. Lineage Dance Company's Thomas and Kolb draw both artistic and personal inspiration from the class. "You've got people who are wicked strong and so resilient," Kolb says, "and determined to find the good in this day."

Launched two-and-a-half years ago, the Parkinson's class fit perfectly with Lineage Dance Company's philosophy of outreach. The company was already performing benefit concerts for nonprofits across the country, including breast cancer groups and other medical charities. The dances were often about the issues the charities grappled with. That work led to the realization that "people not only needed to appreciate watching dance, but to do dance themselves as a force of healing," says Thomas. So in 2007 Lineage choreographed Dancing Through the Ages, a full-evening work that brought together lay people of all ages — from grandparents to grandchildren — to dance onstage.

In 2009, when Lineage was rehearsing a series of dances about the brain, Kolb tuned in to a PBS Frontline documentary on Parkinson's that included footage of a dance class created by the prominent Mark Morris Dance Group (MMDG) and the Brooklyn Parkinson Group (BPG) in 2001. Kolb, then nursing a

knee injury, was drawn to the plight of people who struggle physically. “Moving is such a part of my life, I couldn’t imagine not being able to do things I want my body to do,” she recalls. She convinced Lineage to bring David Leventhal, program manager of MMDG’s Dance for PD program, to Pasadena for a training workshop.

Over the past decade, the Dance for PD program has expanded to dozens of communities in the U.S. and abroad. The work has also broadened the way MMDG envisions its mission, according to Leventhal. “Traditionally, arts education has been targeted to people who are under 18,” he says, “but there’s a whole population of people who are over 50, who are [usually] seen as people who would buy tickets to a show but don’t get to experience the art from the inside.”

Lineage’s Dancing With Parkinson’s class takes its framework and inspiration from MMDG’s Dance for PD, but Lineage designed the specifics of its own program. Both dance organizations describe their classes as aesthetic experiences rather than physical therapy. Still, participants report at least temporary improvements in their motor skills. “I can move my ankles correctly again,” says Low, whose feet swell up in the evening. In an MMDG survey of participants, two-thirds said they execute at least one daily activity better as a result of dance class. A similar number reported more self-assurance in handling their daily activities.

Neurologists are studying how these classes achieve their therapeutic benefits, but the research is preliminary. People with Parkinson’s are deficient in the neurotransmitter dopamine, and research suggests that exercise can slow the degeneration of dopamine-producing cells, potentially slowing the progress of the disease. Leventhal says dance also adds a creative component – “the idea of imagination [and] aesthetics in the service of movement.” Kolb posits that dancing “somehow tricks the brain” into new ways of accomplishing movement. “You put an [imaginative] intention behind the movement that’s not about having to do a task,” she says.

A few weeks after being sidelined, Low is back on the dance floor shaking her booty. She sashays and shimmies to “The Lady is a Tramp.” No walker. No chair. Sure, she’s a little unsteady at times, but she can really move. And that’s clearly a pleasure. Moses is right there with her, grinning from ear to ear. “I never in a million years thought I would dance again with a group of people,” she says. “It’s fantastic.”

Dancing With Parkinson’s classes are held at 2 p.m. Wednesdays. To register, visit lineagedance.org. Lineage Performing Arts Center is located at 89 S. Fair Oaks Ave., Pasadena. For information, call (626) 844-7008 or visit the website.