

# Austin American-Statesman

## LeBlanc: Dance helps those with Parkinson's slow the progression of the debilitating disease

By Pam LeBlanc - American-Statesman Staff

Irving Solomon swooshes his foot forward and back, then hits the floor with a satisfying clomp in his best impersonation of a tap dancer.

In the next hour and 15 minutes, the 86-year-old, who has Parkinson's disease, trots out some salsa steps, flutters his hands like a jazz dancer, shows off a few ballet moves and strides across the room like a trombone player in a marching band, all under the direction of a trio of professional dancers from the Mark Morris Dance Group in Brooklyn.

"We're not Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire, but we do what we can," says Solomon's wife, Madeleine, 84.

"Speak for yourself," Irving Solomon says.

Twice a week the Solomons attend dance classes offered by Power for Parkinson's, a program of the Capital Area Parkinson's Society. In all, the organization offers nine exercise classes a week, from chair yoga to strength and conditioning sessions. All are free to people with Parkinson's and their caretakers.

"I have a sedentary life, and this changes it for an hour," Irving Solomon says.

Dr. Nina Mosier and therapist Susan Stahl started Power for Parkinson's in January. Stahl's father died of the disease in 2012; Mosier's father is currently living with it.

People who have Parkinson's slow down. Their muscles weaken, they develop tremors, they lose their sense of balance and their voice softens. They may have cognitive issues, too, including dementia and depression.

Those symptoms drive many with the disease to spend most of their time at home, isolated from others because they feel so different. Yet Parkinson's is the second most common neurodegenerative disease behind Alzheimer's disease, with at least 1 million Americans affected.

That's where dancing comes in. Studies show that exercise can help delay the disease's progression and provide a sense of hope for those who have it. Anyone who's tried to memorize a choreographed routine knows dance can be a brain teaser, too.

"We really work on the mind-body connection," says Mosier, who is retired from her practice in internal medicine but has long had an interest in geriatrics.

And today's class is special. About 60 people have crowded a high-ceilinged room at Covenant Presbyterian Church for what feels more like a grown-up version of a high school dance than a boring set of calisthenics.

The instructors are part of a troupe of touring professional dancers in Austin for a performance, "Mozart Dances," at Bass Concert Hall.

Their home studio developed one of the first dance programs for people with Parkinson's disease, called Dance for PD, back in 2001, when the wife of a neurologist walked past the studio and was reminded how dancers use their brains to control their bodies. She approached the head of the studio to gauge interest in starting a class for Parkinson's patients. It took off from there. Today, Dance for PD classes are held all over the United States and beyond, and dancers traveling with the troupe occasionally teach guest classes as they tour.

In Austin, the Power for Parkinson's organization uses the Dance for PD curriculum in its dance classes. While the visit from the New Yorkers is special, the class follows the same general format when locals teach it.

"The premise is to use the structure of dance class — the musicality, flow and creativity, along with timing and imagery — to make movement come to life," says Misty Owens, a co-founder of Dance for PD who visited Austin with the New York troupe. Using the concepts they learned in dance class, the participants can better tackle day to day tasks such as reaching for a can of soup in the cupboard.

"It's very much not physical therapy," says Sam Black, one of the touring dancers. "They're not patients; it's a dance class. It's not just another set of exercises prescribed by doctors."

Imagery plays a big role. "Imagine a helium balloon holding your head up," Owens tells the class.

Austin keyboardist Shawn Ellison provides live accompaniment, his fingers tapping out "Ain't She Sweet" one moment and "Makin' Whoopee" the next, adding to the feeling that this isn't an exercise class at all but a

rehearsal. For one dance, the students wave their arms to mimic the flutter of falling leaves. In another, they dive and swim through an imaginary pool.

“This is our Esther Williams moment,” Owens calls out as the students lean back in their chairs, raise their legs and flutter kick in unison.

The first five or six dances are done while seated, but later on the students stand and hold onto the back of their chairs. By the end, they’re moving across the floor. Cheers erupt after each number.

For many, it’s an opportunity to do something active with their spouse or friend. All the moves can be modified, even for those who use wheelchairs or walkers.

Bob Gerdetz, 83, who was diagnosed with Parkinson’s in 2010, started taking the classes two months ago.

“There’s a little frivolity,” Gerdetz says. “You can be a little innovative. If you don’t do it exactly the same (as the instructors), you can throw in a whoop-de-do.”

He says he feels more flexible and agile after class. “I can sleep better, too,” he says.

As class wraps up, the students form a circle. One by one, in a rolling motion that sweeps around the room, they bow to the person next to them and squeeze their hand in thanks.

Like the dance class, it’s a way, organizers say, to share hope, love and care.

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If you go: Power for Parkinson’s offers nine free exercise classes a week at various locations around Austin and Round Rock. For more information, go to [www.powerforparkinsons.org](http://www.powerforparkinsons.org).