



A step in the right direction

By Alissa Skelton / World-Herald staff writer

Toe, heel, toe, heel. Slap your thighs twice, then clap twice.

Keeping up with the simple dance sequence — while standing up — challenged Xandi Johnson, who suffers from a neurological disorder.

She wasn't always on beat. Sometimes she did the wrong moves or couldn't do the moves at all.

But she enjoyed memorizing the pattern and expressing herself. And she was good at clapping. Sometimes she'd clap uncontrollably.

By the end of this first dance class, Johnson and others were standing in a circle, holding hands, swaying and waving their arms in the air.

Six of the 13, including Johnson, have Parkinson's disease, a disorder of the central nervous system. Symptoms include tremor, rigid muscles and loss of normal reflexes.

The new, eight-week class at the University of Nebraska at Omaha was created to help improve balance, strength, flexibility and coordination.

Movement fights the onset of the disease, so any type of exercise is important to improve dexterity, said Dr. John Bertoni, a University of Nebraska Medical Center neurologist.

Some patients, he said, actually move better while dancing because their bodies more easily flow to the music. If a patient struggles at home to grab something from a cabinet, for example, Bertoni tells them to "dance" their way to the cabinet.

UNO biology professor and researcher Bruce Chase came up with the class after he saw a similar one, called Dance for PD, in Brooklyn. The Omaha course is among the 45 or so Dance for PD programs nationwide and one of only a few in the Midwest.

There are many suspected causes of Parkinson's but no cure. The first sign is usually a hand or foot tremor.

For Johnson, a former counselor with her own private practice, the symptoms started about 10 years ago. Her husband, Chuck, joked that her leg had started to drag.

Soon, her foot dragged more. The couple learned she had Parkinson's disease.

Johnson, now 70, had to stop working. She can't dress by herself, wash the dishes or cook. Five years ago, she had to give up driving.

She spends days home with her husband. She exercises and takes lots of naps with her dog Coco curled up next to her. A caregiver comes two days a week to hang out with her.

A former cyclist, Johnson misses riding on the Wabash Trail. Without good balance, it's difficult to ride a bike.

"Not being able to get around on her own, is really hard," said Johnson's husband. "But attitude is everything and Xandi still has her sense of humor."

Johnson took part in a pilot dance class this summer. She said it makes her happy and improves her balance.

At the recent class, the dancers ditched their canes and wheelchairs to learn sitting and standing dance moves.

Johnson's caregiver and a volunteer UNO dance student each untied and slid off one of Johnson's shoes. Bare feet help with smooth movement.

Introductions were first. Johnson pounded her fists on her chest like a gorilla. "I'm Xandi," she said.

Everyone laughed. Johnson made them feel more comfortable about sitting in a circle while preparing to dance with strangers.

The class started out slow with breathing and hand movements. They warmed up with neck rolls and arm and leg stretches.

Dancers could sit or stand while performing sequences.

For one sequence, they hit their fists together, left on top, then right, then the alternating scissors-style hand move. It looked like a dance from "Grease" and proved to be difficult for some.

Johnson struggled with some moves but still had fun.

"I was a star," she said after the class. "I couldn't believe it."