

“Move Your Arm Like a Swan”

Dance for PD Demedicalizes Parkinson Disease

Carrie A. Butt

The physical symptoms of Parkinson disease (PD) can feel like entrapment. Slowness of movement, stiffness, loss of balance, and tremors make activities of daily living difficult to impossible, and people become isolated, their bodies an unpredictable, unresponsive burden.

Dance for PD[®], a collaboration between the Brooklyn Parkinson Group and the world-renowned Mark Morris Dance Group, is working to lessen that burden. The program uses professional dancers in dance studios to work with PD patients to develop strategies for navigating the world through creative, expressive use of their bodies.

The program began in 2001, when Olie Westheimer, a dance student and founder and executive director of the Brooklyn Parkinson Group, a support group for patients with PD and their caregivers, made the connection between mem-

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bers’ motor challenges and dancers’ design of creative movements. “A professionally trained dancer has so much to teach someone with Parkinson’s disease,” she realized, “just at the opposite end of the spectrum. Both have to consider how ... to make [their] body move. Dancers just do it exquisitely and persons with Parkinsons do it to function every day.” People with PD often have trouble with movement sequencing—getting from point A to point B—which is precisely the specialty of choreographers who use complex movement plans to transport dancers from points A to B in creative, expressive fashion. Many participants in Westheimer’s group also identified themselves as Parkinson patients rather than as people who happened to have PD, and she believed that dance might help loosen the imprint of the disease on their identities. When the Mark Morris Dance Group moved back to Brooklyn into a community center in 2000 after a European residency, Westheimer made the connection, and the program began. Dance for PD classes were initially small but today are held in more than 100 communities and 16 countries, taught by certified professional dancers with at least five years’ experience teaching dance in a group setting.

Dance builds students’ strength, increases their flexibility, improves their balance, and teaches creative movements they can recall and use in their everyday lives, but true to Westheimer’s initial vision, Dance for PD’s primary accomplishment may be to demedicalize their experience of disease. Participants are thought of and referred to as dancers, not patients; PD is not discussed. Program director and founding teacher David Leventhal explains that dancers with



David Leventhal leads members of Brooklyn Parkinson Group in a Dance for PD class at Mark Morris Dance Center.

PD are accustomed to confronting their limitations in the world and approach everyday activities with a sense of trepidation. “In the arts environment,” he continues, “it’s much more about what still is possible for them, problem-solving to figure out what they still can do and highlighting those aspects of their experience that are still accessible to them.” As Dance for PD classes focus on opening up participants to more expansive strategies for managing their degenerative disease, they present the dancers with new possibilities and a rediscovered sense of freedom.

The curriculum is based on dance, not disease. Veteran instructor Susan Weber, who began teaching in 2008 when the program expanded to Berkley and Oakland, California, explains that her preparation and expectations for her weekly classes are not so different from the preprofessional ballet classes she regularly teaches. “I’m looking at my students and what they’re ready for. I’m working to articulate the process of learning [*sic*] something to them in the same way I would any group of dancers, whether they were beginners or advanced.”

Music selection is important, explains Leventhal. It can put participants at ease, even if they have never taken an organized dance class before. Songs from Broadway musicals such as “Hernando’s Hideaway” from *The Pajama Game* and selections from *West Side Story* are popular picks for his classes, but classical, jazz, and most pop music also work, as long as the selections have a consistent pattern and reliable rhythm. Class music varies by culture. In the Dance for PD Indian program, for example, participants will often warm up with movements from Kathak dance, a classical Indian form that combines percussive footwork with fluid movement of

the arms and torso, and Bollywood music and routines fill out the remainder of the class. Scandinavian countries have a strong culture of folk dance and use line and circle dancing in their curricula.

Classes are conducted in creative analogies rather than technical clinical language, a pivot that Leventhal stresses can activate students' imaginations. It's the difference, for example, between the clinical instruction to "lift your arm and extend your fingers" and the more creative command to "move your arm like a swan." Other common analogies he employs are "throw a shooting star," or "splatter paint" à la Jackson Pollock. Weber teaches similarly, noting that instructions to "lift your arm over your head and then drop it" can take many forms depending on students' ability and imagination. The quality of each individual "drop" can be quite different, she explains. "It can drop flatly like a leaf. It can drop like it's in a torrent of water. It can drop through mud. The attempt to express those qualities actually requires different neurologic activity in the body that is therapeutic. But it's gotten that through imagery [*sic*], through expression, and so the class is such a rich blend of the physical work and the expressive opportunity."

In Dance for PD classes, instructors also use analogies to reference space around the body, what Leventhal refers to as "the texture of space." Water analogies, Leventhal explains, are good inspirations for extracting new types of fluid movement from dancers with PD. "Imagine that you're swimming through water or imagine that you're reaching your hand through water. What does that feel like on the skin? You can't go too fast with the water, and you can't go too slowly or you'll stop all momentum, so it's a gently resisted carving action. A therapist would focus more on just getting somebody to move. In dance class we want that to happen, but we want people to think about the how, not just the what. Like an actor it really helps to have a motivation for moving, not just a command to move. And that motivation is something that people can draw up on their own outside of class."

The benefits of Dance for PD classes can now be had outside the dance studio. With the development of a new augmented reality app delivered through Google Glass, people with PD can now access these creative strategies in their everyday lives.



Olie Westheimer, the visionary behind Dance for PD, partners a participant at the Mark Morris Dance Center.

Collectively, Leventhal and Weber have been teaching these classes for more than 20 years, and they know that with each new class they can facilitate an experience that is both physically and creatively useful for people with PD. But they benefit from the experience as well. Coming from the world of ballet, where dancers are striving toward an almost impossible ideal of what bodies should look like and be capable of, Weber has learned to be more generous and accepting of her own. "The grace of the people in PD class is so inspiring. I've learned something from that ... hopefully just accepting my own limitations and frustrations a little more gracefully."

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