



METRO

N.H. kidnapping suspect a mystery



MAGAZINE

Secret world of the Dunkin' Donuts kings



POLITICS

Ireland rel Walsh

In Concord, dance therapist takes on Parkinson's Disease

By Nancy Shohet West | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT SEPTEMBER 18, 2014



PHOTOS BY ZARA TZANEV FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

It's a sunny weekday morning at the Emerson Hospital Integrative Health & Wellness Center in Concord. To a soundtrack of Patti Page singing about old Cape Cod, Susanne Liebich leads a group of about a dozen seniors through a series of gentle dance moves,

swooping and stretching. Some stand along with the instructor; others mirror the arm and leg movements while seated in their chairs.

With its fit, cheerful, tidily dressed participants, it could be an exercise class in a senior center anywhere. But Liebich is specially trained for this particular group. Several years ago, she augmented her professional skill set as a movement therapist by earning certification in Dance for Parkinson's Disease, a program designed by the Mark Morris Dance Troupe.

CONTINUE READING BELOW ▼

“Parkinson's is a disease that can cause individuals to feel trapped in their bodies or limited in mobility,” Liebich said. “I guide participants in movement that is graceful, artistic, creative, mindful, and joyful. This translates into body awareness and more self-confidence, which enhances balance, presence, and gait.”

Most of the participants are in varying stages of Parkinson's, from those whose symptoms are invisible to some whose tremors cause their limbs to shake perpetually as they sit. Interspersed among the patients are family members and professional caregivers, who take part in the class alongside the patients.

As the soundtrack shifts to an Elvis Presley song, Liebich demonstrates a leg swivel, emphasizing again that it can be done sitting or standing, and then combines it with a shoulder shimmy. By the second Elvis track, all but one class participant have risen from their seats and are moving to the music.

Together, patients and caregivers do the cha-cha and rumba. Mark Matson of Acton uses both arms to support his wife, Carol. Though she can't stand on her own, she can make the same leg movements as the other participants when he is bearing her weight. The foot tremors that she was experiencing when they arrived for class cease altogether as she concentrates on the familiar strains of '50's rock 'n' roll.

Roberta Lamond of Stow first met Leibich when she came to speak to her Parkinson's support group; when the instructor told her about the dance classes, Lamond was intrigued.

“It’s a form of exercise, but it’s easier than going to the gym. It gets every part of your body moving. By the end of the hour, everybody is smiling, no matter how run-down some of us may have felt when we arrived,” Lamond said. “With Parkinson’s, I have trouble with movement in general, but I come away from this class feeling like I’m walking a couple inches off the ground.”

“A lot of us with Parkinson’s become effectively housebound,” said Ed Allen of Wayland, a longtime class member. “One of the things I appreciate most about this class is just having something to look forward to every Thursday. It feels good to get out and move and meet up with other people.”

“
‘Parkinson’s is a disease that can cause individuals to feel trapped in their bodies or limited in mobility. I guide participants in movement that is graceful, artistic, creative, mindful and joyful.’
- SUSANNE LIEBICH ,
movement therapist,
describing her dance class at
Emerson Hospital’s health
and wellness center



ZARA TZANEV FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Participants in the instructional at Emerson Hospital can learn leg movements without leaving their chairs.

Another advantage, pointed out Sue Rieder, who drove down from New Hampshire to accompany her mother, Elaine Rieder of Littleton, to the class, is that it gives Parkinson's patients and their caregivers common ground.

"It's something we can do together, and the fact is, I can use the exercise just as much as my mom can," Sue Rieder said. Rieder sees a more somber benefit as well. "I don't know why my mom has gotten this illness, and I don't know whether it's hereditary. I feel like I'm doing the right thing for myself as well as for my mom by learning these stretches and working to keep myself flexible."

And Mark Matson knows that unlike being in a restaurant or another public place, no one in this group will give a second thought to his wife's tremors, or the fact that he carries her through some of the dances.

"This disease can be pretty isolating," he said. "It's hard to find the motivation to leave the house sometimes. This group gives us the chance to get together with other people who are going through the same challenges, whether as patients or as caregivers. I see my wife perk up as soon as she hears the music. And it's always interesting and different every week, unlike physical therapy, which can be rote and repetitive."

As the hour draws to an end, Liebich pulls the group into a loose circle. By now, all are standing except for Elaine Rieder, and she is clapping along to the music and copying the other dancers' arm movements from her chair.

With Jack Johnson singing "Better Together" from the sound system, the group members hold hands and bow to one another, their devotion and respect almost palpable.

"Being with other people who have the same affliction can make you feel less alone in the world," said Ed Polanski of Concord. "I believe that the more active you are, and the more intent you are on not sitting at home with the remote control in your hand, the better off you're going to be in the long run."

New sessions of the Parkinson's Movement class begin throughout the year. Students are welcome for multiweek sessions or on a drop-in basis. For more information, go to www.EmersonHealthyLiving.org or call 978-287-3777.



ZARA TZANEV FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Nancy Shohet West can be reached at nancyswest@gmail.com.

0 COMMENTS

© 2014 BOSTON GLOBE MEDIA PARTNERS, LLC