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Dancing with Parkinson's classes in East Toronto offer participants chance to socialize, enjoy exercise

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Sarah Robichaud is the founder of Dancing with Parkinson's (DWP).



By AHMED DIRIE

Sarah Robichaud, founder of Dancing with Parkinson's (DWP), combines her love of dance and endless energy to run a free program for seniors to try and stave off the debilitating effects of Parkinson's disease (PD).

DWP is a registered charity dedicated to combating PD and its symptoms, as well as facilitating and nurturing a community where those with PD can come together, interact and enjoy various levels of exercise through movement and dance.

A professional dancer by trade, Robichaud transitioned to a career as a personal trainer following motherhood helping Andy Barrie (former host of CBC Radio's Metro Morning) manage his Parkinson's.

After learning of Mark Morris' Dance Groups, where they used dance to manage Parkinson's symptoms, Robichaud was on the first flight to New York to experience the classes for herself.

"I was totally sold," said Robichaud. "People who came in with walkers were waltzing through the room halfway through the class."

Witnessing the positive influence the class had on the participants, both in terms of exercise as well as the community that developed around it, Robichaud knew she had to bring what she learned back home to Toronto.

The rest is history and every day since 2008 Robichaud has taught a spirited and dynamic daily online class at 11 a.m., in addition to other classes at different times throughout the week.

The other issue DWP tackles is senior isolation, a growing problem that was only exacerbated by COVID-19 and the ensuing regulations.

"What we felt was a taste of what seniors experience on a daily basis," said Robichaud. "What we felt was the taste of what people with Parkinson's feel on a daily basis," said Robichaud..

"The anxiety, the loneliness, the lack of activity, the lack of connection to others. You spiral down and your world gets really small. And where's the motivation to do anything? And where's the hope? We want to give our seniors back a voice and [help them] reclaim some dignity."

One such senior is Paul Clancy, who was diagnosed with Parkinson's in 2008 and began attending the in-person classes in East Toronto in 2017.

A hockey and baseball fan with fond memories of the Leaf's Stanley Cup win in 1967, it's the community and variety that Clancy really enjoys about the classes.

"I like the camaraderie," said Clancy. [As well as] the friendships and all the people interacting. The instructors are great people and Sarah shares different styles of teaching."

Clair Wooten, who was trained as a classical ballet dancer and taught full-time at York University's Dance Program, was inspired to join Dancing with Parkinson's after reconnecting with Robichaud at a 2013 panel in Baycrest.

"I approached Sarah right after her presentation and asked how I could get involved," said Wooten, who had previously worked with Robichaud at the Canadian Children's Dance Theatre.

"She suggested I attend classes as a volunteer assistant. After several months assisting classes, I was completely smitten and saw a future for myself as a DWP instructor. At Sarah's recommendation, I started taking teacher training workshops through Dance for PD, based in Brooklyn, and more recently moved to working on my Dance for PD Teacher Certification."

A lover of dance like Robichaud, Wooten runs a fun, active yet slightly more subdued in-person classes attended by Clancy, and many other delightful seniors, from 3:30 to 4:30 p.m. at WoodGreen Seniors' Active Living Centre at 721 Broadview Ave.

Wooten can attest to the positive effects of the classes for the attendees.

"The effects can be seen socially, physically, cognitively and emotionally," said Wooten.

"Be the classes online or in-person, there is a deep sense of community for us all. Social isolation is a big issue for seniors, particularly those living with challenging health issues. The COVID-19 isolation requirements produced a double whammy for many seniors. Many of our dancers have commented on the lifeline that the daily online classes provide."

Not only do the participants benefit from the physical exertion and social interaction, learning the recreating sequences and choreography aid their cognitive functions. The participants shake off the common symptoms of PD including stiffness, tremors and freezing, opening up physically and emotionally by becoming more animated and expressive throughout the class, said Wooten.

Despite the prominent focus on Parkinson's, the classes are open to all seniors, she said.

"This entire program is designed for people with Parkinson's disease," said Robichaud. To help enhance their movement, their motion, their spirituality and to provide them an artistic venue to do so. And if this evidence-based program for people with Parkinson's disease can provide some joy and benefit to [those not suffering from PD], please come and do it!"

In a disease that progressively robs those afflicted of their agency and mobility, Robichaud and Wooten both feel that dance, music and all the classes, both online and in-person can empower those who have PD and enable them to remain connected to their communities.

"I am a dancer through and through," said Robichaud. "My favourite thing in the world is to see other people enjoy their own movement."

To view Dancing With Parkinson's schedule or to register and join an online class, please visit their website at <http://www.dancingwithparkinsons.ca/>

If you would like to donate to the charity, please go to <https://www.canadahelps.org/en/dn/m/39093?v1=true>

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