

How the L'Allegro Movement Project has helped Parkinson's patients through dance

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In the months leading up to Luminato, dancers and teachers from Mark Morris Dance Group have been collaborating with the Toronto Dancing with Parkinson's group and local elementary school students.

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When the L'Allegro Movement Project takes to the stage on Wednesday at the Daniels Spectrum, there will be over 90 people participating in the performance that includes 54 dancers accompanied by Tafelmusik Baroque Orchestra and Chamber Choir. It is not just the scope of the project that makes it special, however. Among the dancers are 34 elementary school children and 14 people who have Parkinson's Disease.

The seeds of L'Allegro go back to 2008 when the Brooklyn-based Mark Morris Dance Group (MMDG) first appeared at Luminato. At that time, company dancers conducted two open workshops with Toronto Parkinson's patients. Among them were clients of Sarah Robichaud's Dancing with Parkinson's class. Robichaud was the first Canadian to undergo instructor training at MMDG's innovative Dance for PD program.

Jessica Dargo Caplan, Luminato's director of education and community outreach, says many threads came together to create L'Allegro. First was the directive of Luminato's artistic director Jorn Weisbrodt that he wanted outreach to be more connected to the main festival programming. "With the Mark Morris group appearing at the festival again this year, and given the company's work with Parkinson's patients, it was a great opportunity to link the two together to do something major," she says.

Beginning last January, MMDG's David Leventhal, program manager of Dance for PD, and two of his colleagues, began teaching the children and Parkinson's patients choreography from Morris' *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato*, the piece that the company will be performing at the Sony Centre, Jun. 21-23. The hour-long L'Allegro project features excerpts from the larger work.

At the heart of L'Allegro is the discovery that dance and Parkinson's have a very beneficial relationship. In 2001, MMDG was approached by Brooklyn's Parkinson's support group to do a workshop. "We had no experience with special needs patients," explains Leventhal, a company dancer at the time. "During that workshop, however, we realized that a professional dancer's training of mind and body fitted the needs of PD patients. While moving to music, their movements became more fluid, and covered a bigger range. In the feedback, they told us they didn't know they could move so differently, that they could do choreography while seated."

Parkinson's is a progressive degenerative neurological disorder that affects the part of the brain that controls movement through the loss of dopamine. Dr. Michael Angel, a neurologist at Toronto Western Hospital and Brampton's William Osler Health System, says patients can feel "stiff and slow, and have difficulty in initiating movement," he explains. "Dance gives them a kick-start through a sensory by-pass of the brain circuits. Movement can be facilitated by the rhythm of music. The why is unknown, but dance seems to be a therapeutic intervention."

Sarah Robichaud founded Toronto's Dancing with Parkinson's as a result of meeting Andy Barrie seven years ago. Robichaud is a professional dancer and personal trainer who has written two books on fitness. Barrie, the former host of CBC's *Metro Morning* had just been diagnosed with Parkinson's and was looking for someone to help him exercise. In her research into Parkinson's, Robichaud came across MMDG's Dance for PD program.

"Parkinson's is a community that needs help in moving. Dance can help control rigidity, freezing, tremors, loss of co-ordination and loss of balance. In dance, movement happen through the back door. It tricks the body. People who shuffle into the room, or use a walker, are liberated through dance."

Barrie, who is chairman of the Dancing with Parkinson's board, gives a clear example of how rhythm helps movement become more natural. "If I sing *Oh Canada* to myself as I walk, I move in a straight line by keeping time to the marching rhythm. The minute I stop singing, my walking becomes erratic and irregular."

Perhaps the best testament to the relationship between dance and Parkinson's is from Robichaud's dancers who are appearing in the L'Allegro project. Graeme Hail is 82 and was diagnosed with Parkinson's six years ago. Horst Peter is 79 and was diagnosed 15 years ago, while William Harker is 74 and was diagnosed three years ago.

They all describe similar experiences with difficulties sticking to an exercise program, and their lack of motivation. Dance class, they say, is the fun place where they can do things that they can't do on their own.

Says Peter: "I know there is no cure for Parkinson's, but for one hour a week, life becomes easier and more pleasurable."

And are they looking forward to dancing before an audience? "In dance class, you drop your inhibitions when you move to music, and now I'm getting a chance to perform to a live 18 piece orchestra," says Hail. "It will be an uplifting experience."

L'Allegro Movement Project takes place at the Daniels Spectrum tonight at 7 p.m.