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# The Park Bench

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## DANCE FOR PD<sup>SM</sup>

The Mark Morris Dance Group (MMDG) and Brooklyn Parkinson Group (BPG) started offering free dance classes for people with Parkinson's in 2001. Since then, through the expanded Dance for PD<sup>SM</sup> program, MMDG and BPG have helped other organizations and individuals replicate dance classes based on the original model for people with Parkinson's in more than 40 communities around the world, including Oakland, Berkeley, Sunnyvale and San Francisco. An introductory training workshop will be held in Davis at the Mondavi Center for the Performing Arts on September 27th. In addition to offering weekly classes for more than 60 people with Parkinson's, their spouses, caregivers and friends, MMDG/BPG has trained more than 70 teachers in the Dance for PD<sup>SM</sup> method, and MMDG regularly offers Dance for PD<sup>SM</sup> classes as part of its touring outreach program in cities where the company performs. Olie Westheimer, the executive director of BPG and the visionary behind the class, and David Leventhal, a dancer with MMDG and one of the founding teachers of the class, spoke with the Park Bench about the program.

### **Why are dance classes good for people with PD?**

OW: In order to dance, dancers use inputs from the environment and mental strategies to guide, control and learn movements. For persons with PD, use of these inputs and strategies helps regenerate the ability to move, promoting a sense of control over physical activity that is lost in PD. Dancers who teach Dance for PD classes focus on aesthetic goals, not on movement limitations. They impart knowledge about how to dance in a safe, social and pleasing environment, with the expectation that their students can and want to learn. They share the joy of dance. Learning, striving to move beautifully and having a good time are good for persons with PD and everyone else.

### **Is it different from other forms of exercise?**

OW: Dance incorporates all of the components of exercise: stretching and strengthening muscles, increasing flexibility,



developing aerobic stamina, heightening proprioception, promoting balance. But there's so much more in dancing: it engages participants in an aesthetic, musical and artistic activity that creates social bonds and a sense of emotional and expressive well-being. Dancing is a meaningful activity.

### **What can participants expect from a class?**

DL: Although each teacher in our program brings his or her own style and perspective to the class, all of the teachers who train with us share a similar philosophy and structure that emphasizes dancing for dancing's sake, and helps participants explore new movements in a safe and fun atmosphere. The first portion of a Dance for PD class takes place seated in a circle to build a sense of shared, supportive community and to remove concerns about balance. From the first minute, participants are dancing together at a level that feels appropriate to them. We lead participants through a complete warm-up that often includes coordination exercises, foot exercises, gestural storytelling, and ends with large movements done across the dance floor. Throughout, the goal is to help people with Parkinson's learn to think and move like dancers by learning, executing and creating dance sequences. Over time, we've seen our students become more confident, graceful, expressive and informed movers.

### **What makes the classes fun?**

DL: While these classes are rigorous--the content is specific and the class is a real dance class--we emphasize exploration and expression, not perfection, and we encourage people to modify things that don't feel good. Everyone dances together so there is a strong camaraderie in the class. The fun comes from the sense of achieving something beautiful, graceful and musical in a supportive group setting. We try to guide people away from physical limitations and toward physical possibilities.

**For more information about the introductory training workshop, the program and class locations, please go to [www.danceforparkinsons.org](http://www.danceforparkinsons.org) or call 646-450-DFPD (3373). Watch The Park Bench for more information about area groups.**