

# Moving with the times

Dance for PD® – a unique US-based dance collaboration – has come a long way since its modest launch in 2001. With its simple-yet-adaptable model now being replicated all over the world, co-founder **Olie Westheimer** explains its numerous benefits and urges EPDA members to get involved in the fun



Main picture and inset: Dance for PD® classes in full swing

“**F**ar too often, people with Parkinson’s (PWP) are defined by their disease and find their lives a cycle of doctors’ appointments and therapy sessions. Even a support group is part of that world and I felt they should be doing something else – something that would define them as people, not patients.”

Olie Westheimer is talking about Dance for PD® – a specialised dance class she founded with the highly acclaimed modern dance company Mark Morris Dance Group (MMDG) in 2001 in Brooklyn, one of New York City’s five boroughs. Not only was it launched to empower PWPs to explore movement and music in stimulating and creative ways, she explains, but it was also designed to give PWPs and their loved ones (who often attend the classes too) the same sense of joy, physical engagement and sense of purpose that trained dancers feel while dancing. Ten years on and those ideals are still going strong and, as a result, the classes are growing in popularity around the world.

The origins of the Dance for PD® programme can be traced back to 2000 when Westheimer volunteered to help her husband – Dr Ivan Bodis-Wollner, director of the Clinical Center of Excellence for Parkinson’s Disease at New York’s King’s County Hospital and SUNY Downstate Medical Center – create a support group for his Parkinson’s patients. Westheimer, who had studied dance, was struck by how many PWPs discovered ways to help themselves move. “They were thinking like dancers,” she explains. “I became convinced that they could dance – and would benefit from dance training.”

Westheimer read that MMDG had recently built and moved into its Brooklyn studios and was looking for ways to become involved in the community. She approached MMDG executive director Nancy Umanoff with her concept and within 90 minutes the dance company agreed to give the experimental class a try with dance teacher Misty Owens and company artists John Heginbotham and David Leventhal leading the class with live musical accompaniment.

Free classes were soon offered to local PWPs and, to help grow the dance programme, the official Brooklyn Parkinson Group (BPg) – of which Westheimer is founder and executive director – was quickly born. What began as a monthly Brooklyn class with a handful of members has since grown in popularity to such an extent that it now attracts 30 to 45 students every week from across the entire metropolitan New York City area. Elsewhere, the programme’s model has proved just as popular, having been replicated in more than 50 communities around the world, including 20 US states as well as growing numbers in Canada, Germany, India, Israel, Italy and the UK.

## SIMPLE YET INSPIRING

As Dance for PD® began to grow, so did BPg. Following requests from participants, it began offering other free-of-charge community-based arts and exercise programmes with the same goal in mind – to engage PWPs’ minds, bodies and spirits while encouraging them to remain active within the community (see page 24).

Westheimer believes that Dance for PD® classes are the inspiration behind BPg’s growth. “I was acutely aware of the

considerable unspoken frustration, depression and isolation that existed among so many PWPs,” explains Westheimer. “I saw how difficult it was for PWPs to share an enjoyable activity with family and friends – that bit of normalcy was missing. It transpired that both the MMDG and I wanted to connect with the community – and that is what we did.

“Dance for PD® classes are an opportunity to put Parkinson’s aside for a while – they are real dance classes with specific content. The training involves learning how to think and to use all of the senses in order to control movement. In class, symptoms are not mentioned and there are no physical goals to meet, only aesthetic ones. Our classes lead people away from movement limitations towards movement possibilities.”

At the same time, dance incorporates all the components of exercise: strengthening and stretching muscles, increasing flexibility, developing aerobic stamina, promoting balance. “But dance is so much more than



*“Dance for PD is an opportunity to put Parkinson’s aside for a while. We pay more attention to who somebody is rather than what disease they may have”*

scheduled and are in the planning stage. Westheimer estimates there are at least 1,000 PWP’s and their families around the world currently benefitting from the Dance for PD® programme. About 80% are thought to be in their early stages of the disease.

#### **AN INCLUSIVE MODEL**

In Brooklyn, the Dance for PD® classes are open to anyone with Parkinson’s, and Westheimer believes this level of inclusion is a vital component of the programme’s success.

But while Dance for PD® continues to expand, so too do BPG’s other arms. For example, the organisation is in the middle of launching an art appreciation programme in collaboration with the renowned Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). BPG members will be allowed to visit the museum privately to look at, enjoy and talk about exhibits and carry out art-related projects led by MoMA educators, says Westheimer.

She adds that the EPDA’s 45 member organisations could also benefit from BPG’s simple, inclusive philosophy. “Everything we do reminds our members that they are still a part of – and connected to – the community, whether it’s a fitness, dance, singing or arts class. We pay more attention to *who* somebody is rather than what disease they may have.

“When we hear our members tell us, ‘I love it here – it feels like family’ and ‘BPG gave me my life back – I wouldn’t keep going without it’ and ‘We’re all winners – we do stuff, we’re active’: that reminds us why we do what we do. A growing number of BPG members are helping us to grow and we believe our model is transferrable and workable everywhere. So get in touch and become part of the group.” ■

For more information about Dance for PD® or other Brooklyn Parkinson Group programmes, contact [oliewestheimer@brooklynparkinsongroup.org](mailto:oliewestheimer@brooklynparkinsongroup.org).



that,” continues Westheimer. “It creates social bonds and a sense of emotional and expressive wellbeing. It is meaningful.”

#### **A LEARNING EXPERIENCE**

The Dance for PD® programme’s recent expansion beyond Brooklyn has been a direct response to numerous individual requests from PWP’s, dancers and Parkinson’s organisations who have wanted to develop and teach similar classes based on the MMDG/BPG model. As a result, Dance for PD® now offers teacher training workshops and master classes. Its website ([www.danceforparkinsons.org](http://www.danceforparkinsons.org)) contains a wealth of information for anyone interested in the programme.

“We have learned what works in class and what doesn’t, and we have learned *how* to take all of the elements used to teach dance and make them accessible to PWP’s,” she continues. “With Dance for PD®, PWP’s have

access to all kinds of dance.” Students can learn ballet and modern dance, tap, square dancing and Broadway chorus line routines. They are even able to choreograph their own dance sequences. In addition, some classes focus on social dancing. In the Indian Dance for PD® classes, for example, the traditional kathak dance is taught.

“We want to share what we have learned with other dancers, Parkinson’s organisations – anyone interested in learning about Dance for PD®,” says Westheimer.

More than 300 dancers have already been trained in the Dance for PD® model, and 80 of these are currently teaching classes around the world. More workshops are

## WHAT IS BROOKLYN PARKINSON GROUP?



Fitness for PD



Sing for PD

Brooklyn Parkinson Group (BPg) is a US organisation based in Brooklyn, New York City, which offers people with Parkinson's (PWP) and their families a wide range of arts and exercise programmes. BPg's flagship programme is Dance for PD®, which launched in 2001. Dance for PD® offers PWP specialised dance classes that are stimulating, creative, inclusive and fun (see main article). BPg's other offerings include:

- **Sing for PD.** Launched in 2006, this weekly programme provides PWP with singing techniques and advice via a professional voice coach and a range of musicians.
- **PD Movement Lab.** Launched in 2006, this weekly experimental class – developed for BPg by PWP Pam Quinn – uses dance concepts to address Parkinson's symptoms. Quinn also presents at Parkinson's conferences and teaches her methods to a variety of therapists.
- **Fitness for PD.** Launched in 2008, these twice-weekly classes are taught by a range of fitness trainers. The emphasis is on the importance of endurance, strength and flexibility when it comes to exercise.
- **Support group meetings.** BPg initially offered one monthly support group meeting for PWP only. There are now separate meetings for both PWP and caregivers. PWP organise and facilitate their own meetings, determine topics for discussion and invite speakers to talk. The caregiver meeting is led by a professional, licensed social worker.



PD Movement Lab

- **Community-based research and outreach.** BPg has presented on Dance for PD® at various congresses around the world. More recently, a quantitative and qualitative study focusing on the benefits of Dance for PD® was presented at the Movement Disorders Society in Toronto, Canada, in 2011. Meanwhile, a paper on Dance for PD® was published in the *Topics in Geriatric Rehabilitation* journal in 2007 and a paper on Fitness for PD was published in the *Journal of Neurologic Physical Therapy* in 2011. More research about BPg's various classes are also being planned.