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Recreation

# Dancing for yourself

*A local Bellingham dance class gives people with Parkinson's and other neurological disorders a safe and supportive group who share similar life challenges*

By [Briana Tuvey](#)

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Kuntz has the class focus on arm movements while sitting in chairs at the Firehouse Arts and Events Center in Bellingham, Wash., on Monday, Feb 6, 2023. These movements will help members with their coordination abilities, something people with Parkinson's and other neurological disorders often struggle with. // Photo by Briana Tuvey



Having a neurological disorder brings challenges in everyday life. The way you move changes and suddenly you can't do things you used to.



[Dance for People with Parkinson's Disease and Other Neurological Disorders](#) gives people a chance to move in a way they may not be able to normally in a safe and supportive space.



Dance for People with Parkinson's is a free class instructed by Pam Kuntz, a dance professor at Western Washington University. Kuntz founded the class with Rick Hermann, who had Parkinson's and has recently passed.

"I like to be in a situation where I can move freely, and there's no shame, nobody has any judgments," said Jo Pullen, who has been taking the class since it began 11 years ago. "This is a highlight for many of us each week ... to be able to be totally ourselves."

Pullen, who was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis over 40 years ago, said Kuntz has inspired her for over a decade.

People are supportive in the class and in the Parkinson's community, according to Patty Blake, a new member of the class. Blake has balance and fatigue issues that come from her Parkinson's.

Although Blake is new to the class, she has already noticed Kuntz's lively, energetic personality.

"She's such a cheerful person that you can't help but feel good while you're doing all these things," Blake said.

Dancing provides support and social stimulation, which is helpful in reducing depression and improving quality of life, according to Virgil Sweeney, the executive director at [Northwest Parkinson's Foundation](#).

The class is sponsored by the Northwest Parkinson's Foundation, an independent nonprofit that creates and sponsors free programs for people with Parkinson's. They also do personalized care consultations for those needing guidance navigating Parkinson's.

"The community and support, being in the space with other people who have maybe a similar challenge, it's a wonderful experience," Kuntz said. "We goof around a lot. I mean, we work hard, but there is some friendly banter."

Not only is the class open and supportive, but it is also a great way to exercise, which is important for people who have movement disorders.

Dance is helpful with walking and balance in people with Parkinson's and patients afflicted by similar disorders. According to Sweeney, the combination of movement with music can be powerful.

"I'm supposed to exercise every day, and I'm not good at doing that, and this is another way to get some exercise in," Blake said. "As it turns out, it's a whole lot of fun."

Life can be difficult for patients with neurological disorders. This class, although important for physical health, is there for participants to enjoy.

"It's hard for me some days ... to be able to move my arms and feet the way she's telling us to," Pullen said. "[Kuntz will] let us do whatever you want to do or however you want to do it because that's the idea, be here, do what you can and have a good time."

Some days may be hard, but once a week members get the opportunity to meet people who live similar lives, move and have fun.

"These are the people who show up, who show up for life," Hermann said in a [promo video](#) made five years ago.

Dance for People with Parkinson's and Other Neurological Disorders will continue every Monday until March 6 from 1-2 p.m. at the [Firehouse Arts and Events Center](#). The next session will begin again on March 31 for 9 weeks on Fridays from 10-11 a.m. Admission is free and caregivers are welcome.

Contact [kuntzpam@gmail.com](mailto:kuntzpam@gmail.com) for more information.

For more photos from the class, click [here](#).

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### **Briana Tuvey**

*Briana Tuvey (she/her) is a sports and recreation reporter for The Front this quarter. She is a third-year and is planning to major in visual journalism with a minor in psychology and sociology. She also enjoys soccer, photography and watching movies.*

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