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BALLET DANCE CLASSES BRING HEALING

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Dance instructor Pam Kuntz practices some moves with her class. // Photo by Julia Vasallo

By [Julia Vassallo](#)

Strength, flexibility, coordination and heightening self-awareness are all things that dance does to the body. For those living with neurological disorders, these skills can make all the difference according to artistic director Pam Kuntz.

Kuntz, who has been a dance instructor at Western for the last 20 years, started a community class called Dance for People with Parkinson's Disease and Other Movement and Neurological Disorders nine years ago. Kuntz said she started the community class through her business, Kuntz and Company, for people with neurological disorders to participate in physical activity through ballet techniques.

Kuntz's production of a dance number titled "Stories from Jim and Jo" is what inspired the class. She designed the piece after meeting community member Jo Pullen, who lives with multiple sclerosis. Kuntz created the dance piece with Jim Lortz, who has Parkinson's Disease, to tell the story of living with a neurological disease.

"People who have neurological disorders are in need of a physical activity that can challenge them while bringing joy, one that is different than physical therapy," Kuntz said. "Some folks want more of a creative outlet, and they tend to find that with my class."

In the studio, there are rows of chairs where the participants can comfortably engage in the movements designed to improve their health. Mirrors and barres line the back wall, and Kuntz plays music, often from the 1950s-1970s, that participants enjoy.

The classes are free and have been sponsored by [Chuckanut Health Foundation](#), [Peace Health Neurology](#) and [APDA NorthWest Chapter](#), according to the Kuntz and Company [website](#).

Judy Brightman, who had a stroke in October that paralyzed her entire left side, has been attending the classes for eight weeks.

“I got tired of doing the repetitive things in physical and occupational therapy, so I stopped doing things like that and started doing more normal things like this,” Brightman said. “We are not ballerinas here, but it’s pretty fun. Now I can talk and walk better, and I can even see improvements in other people.”



Kuntz teaches a ballet class to people living with neurological disorders. // Photo by Julia Vassallo

Brightman hopes other types of classes besides classic ballet are going to be offered in the future, such as line dancing.

“It’s very basic ballet, but I can see Pam tricking our brains into working again,” Brightman said. “It’s hard to see everything that’s touched, but dancing helps the brain make new pathways and we aren’t even aware of how many things can change for the better.”

Mike Bajuk, a senior instructor at Western, accompanies the participants by playing music on instruments such as percussion and guitar. Bajuk said he has accompanied many dances, composed for multiple projects and has served as an audio engineer.

Along with Bajuk’s live music, Linda Ost has just started her second year assisting Kuntz by helping set up, signing people in and mirroring Kuntz’s

actions during a routine so that participants can watch.

“It seems like the more you move, the longer you can keep the symptoms at bay while increasing your mobility and life span,” Ost said in regard to the dancers. “Pam is just the best teacher, and she makes these classes so easy by always changing things up and treating everyone with respect.”

Ost took dance classes with Kuntz at Western. After Kuntz made an announcement in class about needing an assistant, Ost showed up to the Parkinson’s class and decided to stay and help.

“I love the people here, and it’s so heartening to see how their range of motion improves,” Ost said. “Everyone’s positive outlook helps during the classes.”

According to the Kuntz and Company website, people are encouraged to just show up and participate to the level that they’re able to. Kuntz encourages the caregivers, friends and family of those with Parkinson’s and other neurological disorders to join.

“I don’t think you can separate mind and body, so everything gets addressed in a whole emotional journey while dancing,” Kuntz said.

The classes are on Thursdays from April 4 through June 6 at Ballet Bellingham in Suite 102 for the spring session. They are 10 week sessions and offered three times a year for free.

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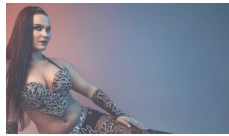
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