



'Showing up for life': Dance class for people with Parkinson's disease offered Tuesday

by Kelli Scott | March 13, 2016, 2:54 p.m.



Photo provided/Angela Kiser, On the Precipice Productions

Pam Kuntz of Bellingham leads a dance class for people with Parkinson's disease and other neurological disorders. "These folks have taught me about showing up for life," Kuntz said. "Maybe you have a bad day and you just want to stay in bed and not do anything. But these people have a bad day, they've got Parkinson's, they can't move, you know? But they show up to class. And that's inspiring. And there's a huge lesson in that. That being joyful about life is really important."



For people with Parkinson's disease, it's hard to hide the symptoms: trembling hands, stiff legs, slow and shaky movement. Parkinson's is a chronic, progressive disorder, and there is no cure. It is what Michael J. Fox has, and Muhammad Ali. As nerve cells in the brain die, the body becomes less able to control movement.

"Some people never recover from the diagnosis," said Rick Hermann, a Bellingham man who was diagnosed in 1992.

Next week, Hermann will come to Wenatchee with his friend Pam Kuntz, a Western Washington University dance instructor who has created a dance class for people with Parkinson's disease and other neurological disorders.

The free one-hour class will be held Tuesday at the Library Distribution Center on Columbia Street and is a mix of seated and standing movements. It borrows the plie and tendu from ballet, and other gentle moves Kuntz has found work for her students.

"She's not dumbing it down at all, but she's also very conscious of our limitations," Hermann said.

Kuntz and her dance company are known in Bellingham for original dance pieces that draw attention to people in that community — people living with AIDS or disabilities, tackling religion or relationships. Seven years ago, Kuntz created a performance piece about locals who have Parkinson's disease.

"In the post-show discussion that night, Rick Hermann was in the audience and asked a lot of questions," Kuntz said. "It was clear by looking at him that he was likely somebody who had Parkinson's. We became friends, and over a period of time we both had the idea that it could be interesting to create a dance class for people with Parkinson's, to see if that could be helpful."

"We literally crossed emails," Hermann said about the idea to start the class. "I got hers and she got mine."

So Kuntz began researching the disease and set about creating the class. Hermann found people to attend. The weekly class remains popular in Bellingham, and Kuntz was recently awarded an Artist Trust Fellowship for her work. The fellowship requires her to present her class in a town outside her own community. Since Kuntz has family here (Mayor Frank Kuntz is her brother-in-law), she chose Wenatchee.

"She chose Wenatchee, and that's lucky for us," said Pat Taylor of the local Parkinson's support group. Her group is co-hosting the dance class Tuesday, along with a caregivers' support group in town, the Northwest Parkinson's Association and the National Parkinson Foundation. While the class on Tuesday is a one-time event, Taylor and Kuntz are hopeful that someone will start a regular class here.

"For most of my life, either as a professional dancer myself or training people who want to be professional dancers, my goal has been to achieve an excellence with physical expression, and for this population, that is not the goal," Kuntz said. "The goal is to create an environment where movement with music brings joy, community and success. You don't want to send people out of that room having failed. So that is my challenge and goal, and it's hard. But as far as the students and what they bring, it's no different than any other dance class. They just bring who they are."

After the class Tuesday, attendees are invited to stay and talk with Kuntz and Hermann. Caregivers, family and friends are welcome to attend. And it's not just for people with Parkinson's disease. Anyone with movement issues is invited. There's no need to register. Just arrive about 15 minutes early, dress comfortably and bring a water bottle. Most people wear street clothes that are easy to move in, though workout attire is good, too. Shoes are optional.

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The Parkinson's support group normally meets the third Tuesday of every month, from 1:30 to 3 p.m. at the Sleep Center on Miller Street. New members are welcome.

If you go

What: Dance class for people with Parkinson's disease and other neurological disorders

Where: North Central Regional Library Distribution Center, 16 N. Columbia St.

When: 1:30-2:30 p.m. class; 2:30-3 p.m. Q and A with Pam Kuntz and Rick Hermann

Cost: free

Information: kuntzandco.org/wenatchee-dance-class

(For Rick Hermann's book about living with Parkinson's disease, go to <http://wwrld.us/rickhermann>)

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