

There are no patients, there are only dancers

David Iverson, Independent filmmaker and Director/Producer of *Capturing Grace*, on how the lives of people with Parkinson's have been transformed by dance



Parkinson's dance class, Brooklyn, New York. Photo: Eddie Marritz

The Mark Morris Dance Center is located at a busy corner of Brooklyn, New York. It's home to a legendary modern dance company. But it's also home to a different group of dancers, those who happen to have Parkinson's.

I first stood at that corner a number of years ago when I was making a film about Parkinson's for the American public television series *Frontline*. I'd heard about the programme Mark

Morris and the Brooklyn Parkinson Group had forged in Brooklyn and I was curious to learn more. Little did I know then that what I would see inside would transform my understanding of a condition that had shaped me in so many ways.

Parkinson's came into my life in the summer of 1971. I'd just graduated from college and I got a letter from my mom telling me my dad had been diagnosed with the condition.

I didn't even know what the words meant and in an old-fashioned dictionary read this definition for the first time: "Parkinson's: a progressive neurological disorder for which there is no cure." But I was just 22 and I really had no idea what those words might mean. Fast forward some 20 years to the early 1990s. That was when my older brother received the same neurological news. Jump ahead a dozen years more and it would be >>

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Top: Parkinson's dance class, Brooklyn, New York. Reggie Butts and Carroll Neesemann foreground. Reggie is a major character in the film. Above: Parkinson's dance class, Brooklyn, New York. Cyndy Gilbertson foreground. Cyndy is a major character in the film. Photos: Eddie Marritz

my turn to receive the same diagnosis. My father, my brother and I have all managed to contend with that diagnosis and continue productive careers. But more than 40 years after I first received that letter from my mom, the definition of Parkinson's remains the same: “a progressive neurological disorder for which there is no cure.” But I think what has changed is what it means to live with Parkinson's, a transformation demonstrated by what you see at that busy street corner in Brooklyn.

Reach high

On any given Wednesday afternoon, the renowned Mark Morris Dance Group (MMDG) is rehearsing in one studio, while next a door a different group of dancers is gathering.

“Reach high like you’re picking a blossom from a tree,” David Leventhal, a former leading dancer with MMDG, calls out to the class, “then swing your arms as if you’re tossing the petals into the wind.”

A few walkers and wheelchairs are pushed up against the mirrors that furnish most dance spaces. And while the dancers themselves may be less lithe than the typical students who occupy this studio, they are dancers nonetheless. And that's the first thing people here want you to know. The class is first and foremost a dance class. The goal is not to teach people techniques for dealing with Parkinson's symptoms. The goal is to dance.

Getting beyond being a patient was a key motivation for Olie Westheimer who encouraged MMDG to start the class 13 years ago when she was running a Parkinson's support group in Brooklyn. “What happens is that people are too often defined by the disease. Their lives are a round of doctor's appointments and therapy,” Olie says. “I wanted to remind people that they were still people.”

I see dancing happen

The class begins like any dance class. Members gather for a series of warm-up exercises alongside

David Leventhal and another former MMDG dancer, John Heginbotham, now a rising star in the world of choreography. “I teach a variety of classes, often for professional level students,” says John, “and what I've been struck by is that I can go to a high level class and there sometimes isn't any dancing going on. But when I come to teach the Parkinson's class I see dancing happen.”

As the dance class begins, David Leventhal shouts out directions. “Sharp, then soft,” he says, “like clouds moving across the stage.” David left behind a storied performance career with MMDG four years ago to become the Director of Dance for PD®, a programme that now offers dance classes for people with Parkinson's in 100 different cities and 11 different countries around the world. He sees more commonality than difference between the world of professional dancers and those living with Parkinson's. Both groups, he notes, can't take movement for granted. “Dancers don't just go out on stage and do whatever movement comes out,” David says. “It's a very thoughtful, mindful process. People with Parkinson's have to have that mindfulness in order to move too. So, we're really in the same boat. And that's why we come together as partners in movement.”

Only a snippet of the first dance class I visited made it into my first documentary about Parkinson's, but I knew that at some point I wanted to come back and make a different film. It would be a film about a unique group of dancers and the journey they were taking together, a journey that would eventually be documented in *Capturing Grace*.

The film

We began filming in the autumn of 2011 as the group began preparations for their first ever performance. Over the course of the following year, we witnessed moments of triumph and tragedy, wonderful highs as well as times of intense frustration. But what we documented more than anything



Parkinson's dance class, Brooklyn, New York. Bobbye Butts and Leonore Gordon foreground. (Please note that Bobbye is the spouse of a Parkinson's dancer but a major character in the film). Photo: Eddie Marritz

were compelling individuals who demonstrated the enduring strength of the human spirit.

There's Charlie Tobey, a former star athlete who went on to become the Chair of the Department of Exercise Science at Brooklyn College. Parkinson's robbed him of what he once could achieve in the arena of sports but not what he can accomplish on the dance floor. There's Cyndy Gilbertson, a retired school social worker who captivates audiences early in the film when the stiffness and rigidity of her Parkinson's symptoms are transformed into the graceful moves of a dancer. There's the bank examiner Manny Torrijos, the poet Joy Esterberg, the courageous Marsha Abrams, a beloved couple, Reggie and Bobbye Butts, and many, many more. Each tells us something

about what happens when people join together and experience the power of community and the power of art.

Rediscovering grace

Parkinson's can seem like a relentless force that pushes you back inside yourself, stilling both motion and spirit. It takes courage to contend with Parkinson's but the courage Parkinson's requires may not be the steely-eyed, stiff upper lip variety. Instead, Parkinson's may be best met by a willingness to step out upon a new stage. That's what I learned when I first went to dance class and that's what those dancers continue to teach me today.

Capturing Grace is a film about rediscovery, the rediscovery of a lighter step and the sweetness of motion. It's a story about a remarkable

community of dancers, some professional and some not, who come together to rediscover grace.

Reggie Butts, one of the class participants, put it best: "When the dance class is going on, there are no patients. There are only dancers."

Info



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