

Blwm Dance. Photo: San King.



From source to sea: a journey of flow

Sophie Lorimer pays joyful testament to her early lived experience caring for a parent with Young-Onset Parkinson's as the creative catalyst for her career in community dance. Join her on the journey so far...

“Into each life a little rain must fall”

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow/Led Zeppelin.

While attending the People Dancing in the Summer event in July 2022, I took part in the course Live Well & Dance with Parkinson’s: Finding Flow... lead by Heidi Wilson, Dr Sophia Hulbert, and Professor Sara Houston. I was both honoured and in slight disbelief when Yael Owen-McKenna, the organisation’s Programme Director for Live Well and Dance with Parkinson’s, asked me to write about my own experiences for her newsletter. Not only could I share my thoughts on something so close to my heart, but people actually wanted to hear what I had to say. Now, only a few months down the line, I’m sat here writing a full article for Animated with a newfound confidence in my voice, my work, and my importance in this sector. The concept of ‘finding flow’ – so prevalent in the course this summer – is something that deeply resonated with me and has since given me a lens through which to deeply reflect on the ebb and flow of my own journey to becoming a dance leader.

I like to envisage my developing practice as an entire water cycle. It began as a spring, which filled a little pool, which found its way through rivulets, streams, and rivers to the sea. Some of it evaporated ready to rain over the land and start the entire cyclical process all over again. I like to think I’m in my first ‘raining stage’ now. I am a mere three months into my role as a full-time Emerging Dance Practitioner working for Rubicon Dance in Cardiff, Wales.

But I am getting ahead of myself. let’s start at the source – a swelling force of growth and building.

The ‘spring’ of my journey was filled by my mum’s Parkinson’s diagnosis, and my discovery of community dance that followed it. Therefore, my entire journey has been shaped and influenced by Parkinson’s. I never saw myself teaching, but now in hindsight it’s so obvious that all arrows were pointing towards community dance practice my whole life.

I was born to a ballet dancing mum, who suddenly started developing strange symptoms at the age of 19 when I was 2 years old. Her condition worsened over time, and I grew up with a disabled mum whose symptoms were unexplained. Picking mum up off the floor after a fall and pushing her in her wheelchair were a normal part of my everyday life. My brother and I were young carers throughout our entire childhoods, and it wasn’t until I was 17 that my mum finally received a diagnosis that made sense – Young-Onset Parkinson’s.

At the point of diagnosis, my mum was unable to even sit upright without being tied to the chair back, let alone feed or clean herself. The only things that could get her moving were little tips and tricks we discovered through experimentation. One thing that could always get her moving (even just a little!) was the use of rhythm. To walk we’d march around and chant, “LEFT, RIGHT, LEFT!” as if we were in the military; to make a cup of tea we’d put a dance anthem on, and stir to the beat. At this point, I was in college studying towards a BTEC in dance and didn’t even know about the existence of community dance or dance for health, but there I was, facilitating it in my own home. The spring was filling as I built my skills...

Next come the rivulets of trickling water escaping down, away from the pool, creating new pathways and following old ones: the time came for me to go to university.

My mum finally had her diagnosis, access to medications that worked for her and was living her life with no need for personal carers anymore. We >>



L Jules King (my mum), Blwm Dance. Photo: San King.



Sophie Lorimer, Blwm Dance. Photo: San King.

had found our miracle and it enabled me to move away and study towards a degree in Dance and Choreography at Falmouth University. I was exposed to so many different aspects of dance that I never knew existed before. I have a very clear memory of being shown a recording of Rosemary Lee's Square Dances in a lecture and loving every aspect of it – the volume and range of people participating. And this was still classed as dance?! I was in awe. Discoveries like these became the little streams that funnelled into a river further down the line.

In my final year of university, I wrote my dissertation on A Proposition of Dance for Early Onset Parkinson's, which led me to extensively research existing Dance for Parkinson's practices, dissect them, and develop my own school of thought around them. I adored delving into this topic. I read everything I could find that related to facilitating dance for Parkinson's, which in turn allowed me to become very familiar with community dance practice and how well established it was in the UK.

I learnt that great quality dance didn't have to exist in theatres and opera houses – it was all around us. These realisations formed yet another set of rivulets, permeating into a larger, fuller river.

After completing my degree, I attended my first ever People Dancing Summer School and participated in the Introduction to Dance for Parkinson's course lead by Danielle Teale and David Leventhal. I hoped that it would expand on the knowledge I gained while researching my dissertation and that it would help me gain insight into tools that could help me help my mum. I absolutely adored my time there and have returned at every possible opportunity since. The networking exposed me to people and practices I never would have come across otherwise. People Dancing always offer such rich, high-quality events that drive me to learn more than I thought possible and reflect on all I have in my toolbox already. A flowing cascade of streams, creeks, and rivulets have come from these events.

These various streams of acquired skills and

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knowledge all converged as I began leading a Dance for Parkinson’s session in Pembrokeshire in partnership with Parkinson’s UK. This was the first time I had led dance lessons of any kind and I cherished them. My mum attended every single session as a participant and we had a wide range of people all at different points of their own journeys with Parkinson’s. They were all incredibly open with me, allowed me to try ideas out on them, make mistakes, and were never afraid to tell me they didn’t like something! We became extremely close and spent a lot of time together outside of the sessions, which in turn deepened my understanding of Parkinson’s and how symptoms, medication and coping mechanisms vary from person to person.

The river is next, coursing at speed out to sea and this part of my journey was the development of my own practice as I embarked on an apprenticeship program with Rubicon Dance. Over a 7-month period, I shadowed over 400 sessions in an array of settings from Rubicon’s own centre program to primary schools and hospitals. More streams kept adding themselves to my river, forcing it to bulge and broaden as my skills, confidence and understanding of what makes a fantastic dance leader grew. As I came to the end of my apprenticeship and started to lead sessions by myself, my journey continued from river through to estuary, until all the things I have learnt were out in the wide ocean.

Now, as a full-time Emerging Dance Practitioner with Rubicon Dance, I am leading over 20 hours of dance sessions a week in incredibly diverse settings. The foundational skills and tools I need and use evaporate from the ocean of my journey thus far and rain on my participants across my sessions. As it lands, this rain will flow back down to the ocean to join old streams and create new ones as I continue to develop my practice as a community dance leader, the cycle uninterrupted for as long as I continue to dance – which will be until the day I die!

The entire water cycle metaphor I’ve created to describe my dance leadership came from that first spring which was completely filled with Parkinson’s based skills. There’s no new water – only recycled. I can develop and learn new skills, but my core

understanding of community dance will always be through Parkinson’s. My continuous journey is a homage to the importance of lived experience; how it can shape your practice and purpose into something truly magical.

Being an early-career practitioner, all I can do is write about the journey I’ve been on thus far, but it is my hope that it can inspire others who are also in their early careers to have confidence in the knowledge and skills they have gained already through their own journeys and lived experience.

Water is vital for our survival as living beings in the same way the continuation and flow of learning is vital to becoming the best dance practitioner, you’re capable of being. One day, we’ll be well-established practitioners, who have humungous water cycles that flow with ease, having rained on hundreds of people whose lives we have changed for the better with the magical power of dance.

Thanks aren’t enough but are all I can offer to my mum, to whom I owe my career.

Since diagnosis, she has become a superwoman, challenging perceptions of what people with Parkinson’s are capable of. She still uses dance every single day as a tool to help her move efficiently when her medication isn’t working, but she also is an avid adaptive CrossFitter competing (and winning!) internationally. We recently recorded a vlog about her journey with Craig Richey, a CrossFit Youtuber with over 340k subscribers, after a video of her went viral on Instagram. My mum’s sense of drive is nothing short of inspirational to witness and will continue to motivate me.

Thanks also Alys Smith, my close friend, for patient editorial support.

Info

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Rubicon Fundraiser **[www.rubicondance.co.uk/](http://www.rubicondance.co.uk/Appeal/make-a-donation)**
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Vlog about Mum **<https://youtu.be/qEGTszm3QoE>**

Mum’s Instagram

www.instagram.com/spazzyjules/ (sic)

Mum’s viral video

www.instagram.com/p/CkT4Q1aJcX8/