

Keep on moving

Young onset Parkinson's, disco and the power of connection

Independent Dance Artists, **Michael Joseph (MJ)**, **Lindsay Moffatt** and **Louise White** joined forces to create a fresh-thinking, disco based workshop for people with Young Onset Parkinson's in their home county of Hertfordshire, eastern England. Here, they continue the collaboration, telling how their roads met and merged and offering insight into what it takes to make a first move in your Parkinson's dance career.

How we arrived into People Dancing's Live Well and Dance with Parkinson's programme...

MJ: I first came across People Dancing's programme of development and community dance alongside people living with Parkinson's through a long-time colleague, who suggested I would find it interesting and could add it to my teaching portfolio involving disabled people. I have Wheelchair Dance Sport qualifications and have created inclusive professional work.

I attended the one-day Parkinson's introductory level course, Finding Flow, at the Summer Intensive in 2022, held at De Montfort University (DMU), Leicester. I learnt a lot, from tutors Dr Sophia Hulbert and Heidi Wilson, however, I did not put it into practice as I felt I was not yet ready to teach. I had a busy schedule too and trying to fit in organising Parkinson's classes went on the back burner.

Lindsay: During the pandemic lockdowns, I had time to reflect on what was important to me. I realised it was my family and dance! Having taught

children and young people for many years (including on Zoom), I knew my passion was dance in the community. My route into dance and Parkinson's was a more personal one though.

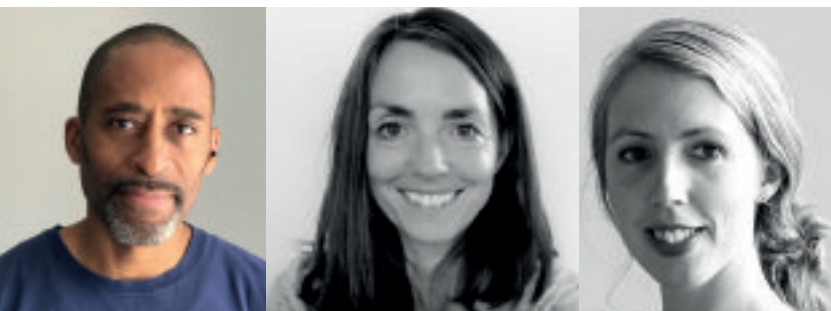
My mother-in-law was diagnosed with Parkinson's a few years ago and I was fascinated by how movement might improve her balance. Having completed the online People Dancing Parkinson's course, the two-day more advanced level course at the Summer Intensive 2023 was the next step on my mission to make dance accessible for those with Parkinson's.

Louise: I am Director of Dacorum Community Dance, a small dance project specialising in dancing with older adults and we often have people who are living with Parkinson's in our classes. I wanted to find out more about the condition to understand how I could make the most of the contact time I had with those participants. Reaching people who have a diverse range of conditions within the same dance class is always a challenge!

I had attended a one-day Parkinson's course with Danielle Teale as part of Dance Re:Ignite, a Hertfordshire based dance project for older adults run by BEEE Creative and also taken part in People Dancing's online training. These experiences were inspiring, so I wanted to complete the training.

Our collective experience at People Dancing Summer Intensive, July 2023:

MJ: The two-day Parkinson's dance course on the Summer School Intensive 2023, again at DMU and again led by Heidi, was a joy. As I had previous experience of the course in 2022, it made much more sense to me and, after it, I felt I had the tools to teach a group in Hertfordshire.



LtoR: Michael Joseph. Photo: Michael Joseph; Louise White. Photo: Louise White and Lindsay Moffatt. Photo: Lindsay Moffatt.





Top: Michael Joseph & Summer Intensive Participants, Disco warm-up. Above left and right: Parkinson's course participants and members of Live Well and Dance *with Parkinson's* dance group, Nuneaton. Photos: Rachel Cherry.

I was also invited both years to teach an early morning Disco Dance Warm Up open all Intensive participants – it being known to programmers that was how I first began dancing with my twin brother back in the day! – and I felt this was a great model to use for Parkinson's, especially using vinyl records for music playback as especially younger people living with Parkinson's would be familiar with this era, hopefully bringing back happy memories and well-loved, familiar grooves to enjoy.

During the 2023 course, we were asked which area we lived in and lo and behold, there were three other participants in Hertfordshire! I knew I had

to talk to them to see if we could work together. We exchanged details and planned to meet up in the near future. After that meeting, plans fell into place and Louise White was approached about a Parkinson's event in Stevenage we could all teach at.

Lindsay: Louise, our colleague Laura and I attended the Summer Intensive Parkinson's dance course together this summer. It was such an inspiring but exhausting few days!

We met the most amazing group of dance practitioners, including MJ, who we discovered also lived in Hertfordshire!

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As part of the programme, we had the opportunity to join an established Parkinson's dance group, led by Sonrisa Arts, a CIC, based in nearby Warwickshire. The experience gained from meeting and seeing them in action was invaluable. With the lesson planning skills, vital information about the condition, funding advice and confidence we'd gained from the course, we knew as a team we could start planning and implementing our ideas in Hertfordshire.

Louise: Meeting and bonding over the fact that we were all dance artists from the same county on the People Dancing course gave us strength in numbers and a shared learning experience we could take back to Hertfordshire.

It was really helpful to see and hear about other Parkinson's projects, be part of a live Parkinson's class, applying what we had learnt on the course and talking with participants and practitioners. Listening to Sonrisa lead artist, Kath Kimber-McTiffen, digging down into the detail around how the class was originally created, funded and manages to continue today, we were excited by the possibilities for us in Hertfordshire moving forwards.

Our experience as a collective creating a Parkinson's dance class...

Lindsay: Feeling inspired from the Summer Intensive, we got in contact with our local Parkinson's UK Area Development Manager (East), Julie Wilson. She connected us with Russell and Ahlam from Live Well with Parkinson's in Hertfordshire. This is a social and active group for people living with early onset Parkinson's (1). We were delighted to be asked to join one of the group's regular evening zoom meetings and the invitation to trial some taster sessions at their next get together followed. Following several catch ups and planning sessions to consider the dance content and the practical issues with the condition, we were ready to put everything into action.

Louise: I attended the Dance for Parkinson's course with Lindsay, because we are keen to set up a dance for Parkinson's class in the borough of Dacorum where we both live.

Finding out MJ was from so near in Hitchin was great and we all already work with Laura Horn from Watford.

We started to discuss pooling our resources, using this shared experience we had and being able to provide support and cover for classes with each other, possibly creating a network locally for Dance for Parkinson's. It was exciting to know we weren't alone, it's so much easier to create something with the support of others.

As Lindsay says, Julie at Parkinson's UK had raised the issue of the need for provision for people with early onset Parkinson's; most activities available run during the day and are for older adults. Our classes needed to be in the evening to fit around participants working hours.



Summer Intensive Participants, Disco warm-up.
Photo: Rachel Cherry.

Russ told me that "keep on moving" is an often-used phrase within the Live Well with Parkinson's group so 90s music stars, 'Soul to Soul' and their huge hit with the same title had to be on our playlist! The Disco theme came naturally as we had our very own Disco Daddy in MJ and had already experienced the positive effects on our spirits of his class at the Summer Intensive for ourselves.

MJ: For the pilot class, we drew inspiration from my Disco Dance Warm-up using tracks that had a happy upbeat tempo. We had a planning meeting to suggest the tracks and who should teach what and made sure there were enough seats all around the room we were allocated. Everything we learnt at Parkinson's Summer Intensive, we implemented with our class and I, personally, felt at ease with my prior knowledge from the previous courses. It was a joyous event and the participants said they thoroughly enjoyed the day.

Lindsay: The sessions were a team effort and it was a 'disco-tastic' day, full of laughter and invaluable feedback.

Louise: It was a beautiful sunny day at Hampson Park Community Centre in Stevenage. We danced, sang and laughed together. Our dancers were amazing, creative and imaginative with some pretty impressive skills in the Soul Train (2), expertly led by MJ. After-class, we ate gorgeous home cooked food, there was even Nordic walking happening outside! It was a real insight into the type of challenges people





Above and bottom left: Parkinson's course participants and members of Live Well and Dance *with Parkinson's* dance group, Nuneaton. Photos: Rachel Cherry.

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living with Parkinson's face. The group echoed the need for more activity for people living with early onset. They feel out of place going to groups designed for older adults, as they are at a completely different stage in their lives and have different issues to face.

So what next...

Now, we want to continue to drive this to see what can come out of such a promising start, ideally, we will all set up classes in our local communities and would love to be able to bring our groups together at events like Russ and Ahlam's.

The opportunities are endless, but there are also challenges around accessing funding and the logistics of it all. We live in a big county for the UK! However, we can share practice and support each other. Hertfordshire has a strong growing network of dance practitioners. With the support of BEEE Creative, we have just launched our first Inspire Motion event – a consortium of dancers from across Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire, whose aim is to increase participation in dance and movement activities by people living in those areas.

As freelancers, we are constantly trying to find new ways to do the work that we want to do and that we know is vital. This is done by contacting those key people in our boroughs who can advocate and partner with us, accessing funding, setting up and supporting our delivery. Of course, we

need time, support and resources for all of this to happen, but we share a passion as dancers to bring accessible, high-quality dance to our communities and to this incredible group of adults who live and work with Parkinson's every day.

After the class, one participant commented that it was the most invigorated he had felt in two years. This is what drives us and as the saying goes, where there is a will there's a way!

If you are able to support us, want to hear more or talk further about our plans, please get in touch at dacorumdance@gmail.com or michael.joseph2@icloud.com

References

1. Parkinson's is often thought of as a late-life condition. However, 1 in 20 people with Parkinson's develop symptoms before the age of 50. This is known as young-onset Parkinson's.
2. 'Soul Train' involves two lines of dancers opposite each other in pairs taking turns to enjoy improvising together down from the top to the bottom of the corridor of space in-between couples; when partners reach the bottom, they part and rejoin their respective lines, gradually moving up the lines until it is their turn again.

Info

www.dacorumdance.co.uk
www.parkinsons.org.uk/information-and-support/young-onset-parkinsons