

Rachel Rogers



Our dancing days are (not) done...

Rachel Rogers, Project Development Manager, Merseyside Dance Initiative, reports on their health and wellbeing work with older people from the Caribbean community in Liverpool

In 2010 Merseyside Dance Initiative (MDI) were key partners with Liverpool primary care trust (PCT) as part of Liverpool's Year of Health and Wellbeing. We also began to galvanise our approach to health and wellbeing projects through developing a dance and health strategy and three year programme of work. We are now in the process of identifying funding for this programme that we hope will run until 2014.

Working with the PCT gave us an opportunity to expand our provision for older people. Whilst our regular over 50's sessions are popular, they only cater for a specific section of the population, nearly all of the participants are White British and it is unlikely this demographic will change without some long term developmental work in more mixed communities. It would be wonderful if these classes reflected the demographic of Liverpool as a City, however,

in this instance we had one year to make a difference and deliver quality dance work reaching more diverse groups.

African People's Dance (APD) has been a priority for MDI since the late 90s and we retain the post of APD Community Artist originally shared with Dance Initiative Greater Manchester. Maxine Brown has held the post from the start and has recently completed a Masters Degree in Dance and Somatic Movement Education at the University of Central Lancashire in Preston.

Maxine had a desire to combine her two passions and work closely with the older Caribbean community by delivering work that had a health focus. For three months Maxine worked with Sheila Kennedy leading weekly dance sessions in Hector Peterson Court in Liverpool 8, one of the most deprived areas of the city. The residents are mostly from Caribbean backgrounds, many are first generation

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MDIs Hector Peterson Project. Photo: Maxine Brown

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immigrants who arrived in the 1950s and 60s. Sessions were open to residents and non residents and were aimed at but not exclusively for the older Caribbean community.

Activities in the sessions included meditation, caribbean Quadrille' dance and reminiscence. It was vital that the space was regarded as 'safe' and an atmosphere of trust was built. Activities took place with the group in a circle encouraging equality and community. Sessions began with breath work and Maxine continued with a short somatic meditation encouraging individuals to change their perception of what they thought they could achieve.

The movement that followed included stretching, mirror and partner work and developed to involve elements of folk dance. Group members were familiar with the Quadrille and this dance style initiated discussions about people's childhoods before they came to the UK. Maxine found it easy to include elements of Ceilidh, as there are a number of similarities to the Quadrille format.

This project aimed to improve the mental wellbeing of those taking part, without being labelled a 'mental health project' or targeting individuals with mental health issues. We aimed to do this by providing the group with an opportunity to connect with each other through movement, touch, cultural links (to each other and to the Caribbean) sharing time and stories. These elements combined to address the serious problem of loneliness and depression often faced by older people. These problems can be magnified for black and minority ethnic (BME) groups who are physically disconnected from their home and may also be disengaged from their community due to health problems or decreased mobility. These communities can be smaller, more disparate and less connected, giving less opportunity for interaction.

Reminiscence was included to allow the group to share stories and information in a safe space, yet it began to serve another purpose. The group started to talk about how they danced when they were young and how important dance was to them in their earlier lives. They discussed their arrival in the UK and the dances they brought with them from the US (via the Caribbean, mostly Jamaica).

There were also stories of the terrible racism they encountered often meaning that the black community did not feel safe going to the white clubs in the centre of town. Smaller venues in Liverpool 8 such as Stanley House and other social clubs provided a safe environment for dancing, socialising and connecting to each other and their

homeland. Their reminiscence began to track the social and political history of black dance and culture in Liverpool between around 1950 and the 1980s. Through these vibrant and sometimes painful memories, deeper connections were made within the group.

Overall the project ran well however, there were practical obstacles, such as when to run the sessions so as not to interfere with mealtimes, and clashes with bingo meant that on occasions there were very few participants. Feedback suggested that some people would prefer to 'go out' to take part in such an activity as they might feel more open to new experiences.

There were also difficulties around mental illness and depression, these being a taboo subject for most in the older African and Caribbean community. Discussing mental wellbeing head on was problematic and this had an effect on gathering feedback and measuring impact as people seldom expanded on 'I really enjoyed the session'. Towards the end of the project people did open up and discuss how sharing time and chatting had improved the way they felt.

There were some issues with practical participation as well. Many of the group began their storytelling with 'Me...dance! My dancing days are done...' They would go on to illustrate a long and colourful personal history of how dance had been central to their lives and their body language and movements became a dance in themselves. 'It was hard to get the men to join in, this said, they would play cards in time to the music and dance in their chairs...!' With more time we believe people would begin to experiment more freely outside of their comfort zones.

Maxine '...noticed again how important it is to allow the group time to absorb what you are passing on. Sometimes you teach one movement talk about it for five minutes or more until it really resonates with them before you can move on and that's a necessary and valuable part of the session.'

'This project reinforced how important it is to bring yourself to the people and not just expect them to come to the class you have set up and this can be hard work and time consuming. I was also reminded how dance can rebuild community values and connections – one woman had not spoken to someone in the group for years despite seeing them twice a week for bingo – through the project she began to share comments then jokes and stories and they started to rebuild a relationship.'

'Sometimes I needed to modify dances and steps to suit the group. I spent a lot of time reinforcing that just standing

Maxine Brown



up and moving to the rhythm was really beneficial. It was really rewarding to see Jasmine change her attitude to moving from saying, 'I can't...' to 'I can...' To see people realise that they could still dance and recognise that it was not the same as in their younger days but it was still dancing and it was still fun and valid was really rewarding as an artist.'

'The structure of the dances promoted touch and eye contact, which encouraged the group members to make simple connections, that might be missing in their everyday lives and are sometimes discouraged in Caribbean culture. I think the best thing though was leaving people smiling and knowing the group would sit and talk after the session had finished.'

As an organisation, we have become even more aware of how little culturally specific dance is available especially for older people and it reinforced that this age group find it even more important to connect with their heritage at this stage in their lives. We have a clearer understanding of how to structure this type of activity and are even more determined that future projects will be either longer term or continuous.

At the end of 2010, MDI partnered Bisakha Sarker and Chaturangun on the Memory conference about dance and dementia. This event both celebrated and raised the profile of the incredible work happening in this field in the UK. We were delighted to be able to present a short film giving a flavour of a project led by Wendy Thomas for adults with dementia. Participants were selected in consultation with the staff all were independently mobile, five were residents and five were day care users. There were seven men and three women. This project aimed to test whether individual's levels of engagement increased after attending repeated sessions. We feel that we were able to prove this was the case and this is evident in the longer documentary film charting Wendy's journey as an artist working with the group. The film shows that during the course of the project participants become more comfortable with each other and become familiar with the structure of the sessions, initiating activities themselves. We also have anecdotal evidence that after attending a session, the mood of participants, in many cases, remained lifted for the remainder of the day.

We also premiered a new choreography for older non-professional dancers by Francis Angol. In this project Francis combined elements of his African Contemporary Dance training and Somatic Practice to encourage the

dancers to explore their own physical capabilities and tell their stories. During this process the participants, who were not suffering from dementia reported that they were surprised at how much of the movement they were able to remember from week to week. Another reinforcement that this low-level primary intervention dance work, like the project at Hector Peterson Court, is vital to keep mind and body active and help to reduce the risk of developing some forms of dementia.

Despite the breadth of practice presented and discussed at the conference the event also evidenced that culturally specific dance work or culturally diverse projects in the field of Dementia Care are not common.

Having begun to develop our own dance and dementia programme, we are keen to pursue this work across the region and work with other BME communities. We have had several conversations with the PCT and other departments in the NHS around developing work for these harder to reach communities. We are also keen to pursue opportunities to further develop our work in dementia through a 'Think Family' approach of working across the generations within communities and linking other organisations and institutions such as Sure Start centres, schools and community centres. We feel this approach would be ideal for working in the African and Caribbean communities.

We are aiming to conduct more research into whether regular participation in dance activity can help reduce the need for anti-psychotic prescribing in a diverse range of groups. We hope to develop a model for working with adults with dementia that can be transferable geographically and demographically in order to maximise access to this type of project.

We feel strongly that sustained work with older people will help to improve the wellbeing of the individuals who take part and begin to give a deeper understanding of the culturally specific issues they might be facing, specifically around mental health.

contact info@mdi.org.uk / **visit** www.mdi.org.uk

Reference

(1) www.neweconomics.org/projects/five-ways-well-being
These five ways are: Connect, Give, Take Notice, Keep Learning and Be Active. Research has shown that by including these five ways to wellbeing can add an extra 7.5 years to your life and dramatically increase your wellbeing.