



Participants (Ruthie Snider centre), NBS and Baycrest Sharing Dance with Seniors pilot programme. Photo: Wayne Eardley.

Living apart, dancing together

Lily Jackson, Development Officer, Donor Communications & Research
on how Canada's National Ballet School is using technology to help
seniors in rural and geographically isolated locations age with confidence

Ruthie Snider lives in rural Ontario, Canada, where the long winters and the lack of amenities in her small town left her sedentary. After undergoing two hip surgeries at a young age, she was falling down frequently on her rural property. As she aged, she worried that she was losing her independence.

"I believe that true health involves the mind, body and spirit. But for most of my life, I felt like my body was missing," she says. "I felt like I had no concept of my body anymore."

Ruthie's not alone. For the first time in Canada, seniors (those aged 65 and older) outnumber children aged 14 and younger. By 2036, Statistics Canada predicts that between 23 and 25 per cent of Canadians could be seniors.

For the proportion of this rapidly growing population that lives far from the abundant resources of urban centers, retaining health and independence is a concern.

Enter an innovative programme designed in partnership by Canada's National Ballet School (NBS) and

Baycrest Health Sciences, a global leader in senior healthcare and research. NBS Sharing Dance is a programme that makes high quality dance activities more accessible to children and youth, adults and seniors, and people living with age-related illness including Parkinson's and dementia. As part of the initiative, NBS launched a pilot programme with Baycrest in autumn 2017 to bring dance to seniors in the Peterborough-Kawartha region of Ontario – one of the fastest aging rural regions in Canada. The pilot utilises video streaming technology to beam NBS' expert instruction directly to the region – without the instructors ever leaving NBS' campus in Toronto.

This is how it works. A group of seniors – currently numbering between five and 25 – gather in their community every week. An onsite facilitator logs into the Baycrest-NBS online resource centre, sets up a simple projection system and streams that week's pre-recorded video. Up pops two seated

instructors and a pianist from NBS. They wave hello and say a few words to the group, welcoming back Linda from her vacation or wishing Theo a happy birthday. The class begins with a warmup, progressing to seated and standing exercises that target coordination, flexibility and creativity. The class ends with a section of choreography from a larger work – as the term progresses, the dancers work towards learning the whole piece. The exercises are set to live music from an NBS pianist, and the facilitator watches for anyone who needs help. Afterwards, the facilitator sends feedback to NBS and Baycrest, which the instructors use to customise next week's class.

It may seem an unlikely scene to come from Canada's National Ballet School. But for Rachel Bar, NBS' Manager, Health Initiatives & Research – and a graduate of the school's renowned Professional Ballet Programme – the fit is natural.

"We come at this programme as >>

Older people dancing



Participants, NBS and Baycrest Sharing Dance with Seniors pilot programme.
Photo: Lindsay Riklis.

dancers. We understand the elements that are important for any dance class: the sense of accomplishment, the opportunity to fully engage, and the challenge to recall movements. It's important whether it's for aspiring professional dancers or seniors. That's why our programme is designed with the same level of excellence and attention to detail as those in NBS' professional training programmes."

The joint expertise that Baycrest and NBS bring together creates an understanding of why dance, in particular, is beneficial for seniors. As Rachel explains, dance is a complete activity: it's a workout for the whole body and mind, it's fun, stimulating and socially engaging – key for any dancer, but especially for someone aging independently. It also provides opportunities for creative engagement and self-expression. NBS partnered with Baycrest to develop the pilot programme and the goals and rationales for every component of the classes. The partnership ensured that NBS' instructional excellence was informed by a complete understanding of seniors' needs.

But there was a problem: although it's well established that dance is good for seniors, it is difficult to ensure consistent quality of teaching in every class. This problem is exacerbated in rural areas, where choice of instructors can be slim. Consequently, rural seniors are at a disadvantage when it comes to accessing quality dance activity.

That's where video streaming

technology comes in. It's an easy way to reach rural seniors and it can adapt to different circumstances. In the early phases of the pilot programme, for instance, NBS and Baycrest attempted live streamed classes, which connected instructors and community sites in real time. It worked well in one semi-rural site, but the weak connection in the more remote sites posed a challenge. Based on community feedback, NBS switched to video streaming, which allows facilitators to access the classes in advance.

The result is a programme with consistently high-quality delivery and a format that is accessible to seniors in any rural setting. This consistency is important for Ruthie, who finally feels like her mind, body and spirit can thrive.

"The programme helped me physically do things I haven't been allowed to do for more than 50 years. I gained strength and now I seldom fall. More than that, it built a like-minded community among everyone in the class, which is so important for people living in any rural community."

Denise Gould agrees. She's the Programme Coordinator at Community Care Peterborough, a community organisation that hosts the pilot programme at some of its sites. For Community Care, partnering with the programme made sense for the community and their organisation.

"The pilot programme addresses the needs of seniors in rural areas by providing socialisation and increasing

strength, while restoring balance and confidence for those who could easily be isolated. Community Care provides essential services that support independence and peace of mind for seniors, so it made sense to partner on this pilot programme."

The classes also enable research into how dance benefits older populations. Spearheading the research are NBS' research partners, Trent University's Centre for Aging & Society and Brandon University, who study the potential of NBS' programmes to improve social inclusion for people with dementia. While the video streaming pilot programme focuses on seniors without specific illnesses, it offers important methodological insights. Plus, it provides participant feedback that adds an experiential perspective to the research.

The potential of the research has already been recognised by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, which ranked the Trent/Brandon study first in a recent round of funding applications. The funding adds to a major investment from the Public Health Agency of Canada, which committed \$5 million in matching funds over five years to evaluate and expand Sharing Dance programmes.

This spring, the pilot project will expand to seven locations in Ontario, including retirement facilities. NBS and Baycrest plan to release the programme publicly next autumn, making it available to any community that can provide a facilitator who has experience working with seniors. NBS is introducing a thirty-minute online training course for facilitators to address expectations and provide in-depth information about the programme.

Ruthie is confident that the programme has the potential to change the lives of seniors around the world.

"I went into the project thinking that a person who was so physically limited her entire life could never be involved with a place like Canada's National Ballet School. Now I'm a dancer."

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