



Jen Blackwell co-leads DanceSyndrome workshop. Photo: William Fisher

Living the DanceSyndrome dream

Established in 2009, DanceSyndrome was the inspiration of founder and Creative Director, **Jen Blackwell**, who has Down's syndrome and struggled to find opportunities to follow her dream of being a dancer and dance leader. Director (and proud mum) **Sue Blackwell** talks to daughter Jen and lead artist, **Sophie Tickle** about being empowered by inclusive dance

As the standing ovation at a packed Surgeon's Hall began to calm, DanceSyndrome's founder, Jen Blackwell and Lead Artist, Sophie Tickle shared an embrace. They could be excused for pinching themselves. Three days of acclaimed performances at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival; a dream come true for them both.

Flashback nine years and Jen's decade-long efforts to forge a career in dance had proved fruitless. Her aim was simply to be a dance leader, to inspire others, to choreograph and to perform. But opportunities in community dance for people with learning disabilities were few and far between, so Jen

decided to take matters into her own hands.

She set about creating an inclusive dance company of her own where she and others with learning and physical disabilities, as well as other dance enthusiasts, would feel comfortable and free to realise their dancing dreams and ambitions. With steely determination DanceSyndrome (DS) was born.

Speaking at City Hall, London last year, Jen reflected on how dancing has enriched and transformed her life: "DS has given me a voice to be heard; I feel valued and respected. I hadn't experienced friendship in my life and now I have. I have now got real

friends through DS."

Today, this unique dance company provides co-delivered, inclusive dance workshops and training from five centres in the North West of England. Winners of the National Learning Disability and Autism's Sporting Chance award, the E3 Charity of the Year award, Red Rose Award's Not-for-Profit of the Year and the beneficiary of Spirit of 2012 and Big Lottery grants, the company is now exploring a social franchising model that would enable participation nationwide. Activities in Nottingham and Oldham are the first such offshoots and are already developing an enthusiastic following. >



Dance Leaders Becky Rich and Jen Blackwell (right) at City Hall London.
Photo: Scott Wishart



DS is unique because it has grown and been born out of disabled people's ideas of wanting to create a future for themselves

Speaking about her experience in dance, Jen said, "It's the most magical feeling ever in my entire life. DS is giving all of our dancers the chance to lead warm-ups and workshops which they haven't done before in their lives. They are learning new things and discovering new things, including friendships."

Central to DS's approach, and critical to future expansion, are the company's dedicated dance artists, led by Sophie Tickle. So what inspired Sophie to choose to follow the inclusive, community dance path? A graduate in Drama at Exeter University she was inspired by the power of the arts and dance to engage, stimulate and motivate. She was particularly influenced by the Applied Arts module which included working in primary schools, a sixth form college, a young offenders' secure unit and a pupil referral unit.

"When I finished my degree I felt I wanted to use the arts in a different

way because I had experienced, first hand, their power to transform people's lives. It shocked me that people didn't work inclusively because to me it was very natural and I'd always lived my life inclusively without thinking about it. So inclusive community dance practice was one of the areas that I really wanted to work in as it offers people more opportunities to develop."

The past years have not been without their challenges: "Working with the existing dance artists, I had to learn on the job by listening to the dancers, learning from the dancers and responding to the dancers' needs and wishes. As we grew and received support from funders I was offered a paid position as Lead Artist."

Sophie recalls how daunting it was to mould together a dance company comprising such great diversity: "We decided to take a step back on our journey and give ourselves time to bond as a company and to look at all these amazing, wonderful people

who all had interests, skills and wishes and see how we could bring them all together as a community to engender a sense of team.

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The expertise developed over the past nine years has enabled DS to create ground-breaking training courses for those both with and without learning disabilities. The Dance by Example training course enables those with learning disabilities to gain the skills and confidence to co-deliver dance workshops and take the role of Dance Leader. This training is also aimed at those who want to support Dance Leaders with learning disabilities – principally carers, friends and family members as well as dance artists keen to gain experience in the area.

"Our training recognises that every workshop is different" says Sophie, "there's no such thing as one size fits all. It's completely inspired by the dancers and their passions and interests. It could be high energy, fitness-based or a more creative,



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contemporary, choreographed style, or something in between.”

Keen to spread the word about inclusive practice to a wider audience, Sophie has been instrumental in

developing the Inclusive Approaches Training Programme: “We want to see many more dance artists who are qualified and motivated to become actively involved in inclusive, co-delivered dance.” The DanceSyndrome training course is designed for dance artists who would like to develop this expertise. Delivered in schools, universities and businesses, its content focuses on how inclusion is important in all areas of life and identifies considerations and adaptations to make practices truly inclusive.

So, what advice would Sophie give to a dance artist who may be thinking about becoming involved in co-delivered, inclusive dance? “As a freelance artist it can sometimes feel very lonely and therefore I would say really think about the potential of co-delivery. Having someone to bounce ideas off, inspiring each other, taking different roles within sessions, being able to deal with a difficult situation whilst your co-leader keeps the rest of the group engaged, reviewing the session together are just some of the many advantages of co-delivery.”

Are there any regrets about her choice? “No, definitely not! The biggest reward for me is seeing people grow. The changes I’ve witnessed in each dancer are huge. They are confident individuals. They’ve got their own voices. They’ve got their own opinions and they’re not afraid to express them. The scale of the transformation can’t really be put into words.”



Sophie Tickle and Jen Blackwell with Dance Leader Peter Pamphlett. Photo: Nicola Selby

Fitting, then, that the final word should come from Jen herself on receiving the Enterprise Vision Award for Inspirational Woman of the Year: “DS”, she says, “stands for justice and equality and against discrimination. I won this award for founding the amazing DS dance charity, for following my dreams, for always being focused and never giving up, and for changing other people’s lives. My passion for dance is my life. My life depends on it.”

Info

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Sophie Tickle and David Corr, Lit aDrift. Photo: Rod Penn; Jen Blackwell co-leads DanceSyndrome workshop. Photo: William Fisher