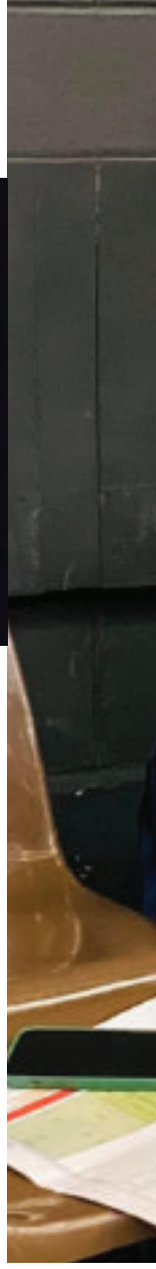
Below left & right: Steph Sandy Foot in Hand, Off Balance Dance The Place Prize sponsored by Bloomberg. Photo: Alexis Haines & Benedict Johnson.







Self-Determined: Dance, dreams, difference and me

Independent Disabled Dance Artist/Consultant, **Steph Sandy** is based in the West Midlands region. One of the UK's first physically disabled dance graduates. Here, she offers us compelling contemplation of the choices, chances and changes which have led to a fresh start mid-career as a community and creative dance professional.

I turned down the operation that could have "straightened" my legs when I was younger.

It wasn't that I didn't want to walk. That option was never on the table and no-one pretended that this operation, specifically offered to people like me with cerebral palsy (CP), was anything other than an aesthetic choice for me.

I can't walk. My legs can't straighten. I can't transfer from one seat to another, wash, use a toilet or even eat without assistance. What I can do, though, is dance. I can "walk" on my knees and any operation that would limit how much I can move would put an end to my dancing dream.

My grandmother – who was as close to me as a grandmother could be really helped my mum and dad to cope with all the complications of having (and for me, being) a severely disabled child – was a dancer right to the end of her life. I still have all her medals from competitions going right into her sixties, and, 15 years after her death, I still miss her like nothing else. She showed me that movement wasn't just a mechanism but an expression. And she encouraged me to not let the fact that I move differently to define myself as anything but a dancer.

Nowadays, I have an outwardly perfect life: a degree, house, husband and two children to keep me busier than anyone has a right to be... and I really do feel that it is dance that got me here.

My secondary school was largely inaccessible and, like Baby from Dirty Dancing, I was often parked in a corner whilst any upstairs lessons (ie.most of them) happened in my absence. University wasn't an option any of the educators in my life considered for me and it was my parents who convinced me to move out, seize my own independence and explore my own passions.

This involved being sent to Coventry by my own family!

Specifically, from my home in the North of England to attend Hereward College of Further Education in the Midlands, where students lived in or nearby and which was known for its ambition and innovation in courses for physically disabled students, particularly in creative subjects.

It is only since I have become a parent myself that I see how big and terrifying a decision releasing me like this was for my mum and dad. She since has told me it was the scariest thing they ever did as



Steph Sandy, Off Balance Dance. Photo: Alexis Haines.

> “I can no longer move in the same way, but dance can still move me and I hope that my work will move dance itself.”

a parent, but looking back it is the single decision that has made me the woman I am. An acorn cannot grow in the shadow of its parent oak; it needs its own light. My mother saw that I needed that space and freedom, and that if I was always able to just ask a parent to do what I could not, I could never have left her shadow.

I like to think that education has got better for disabled pupils in the 25 years since I left school, but back then it was only when I entered Hereward, that I was first really allowed and enabled to express myself and get involved in dance – and I really got involved!

Following on from a BTEC in performing arts and community classes and performances in the city, I was among the first people in the country

Below (L to R): Alexis Haines, Steph Sandy, Suzanne Cantwell Birkin, Off Balance Dance. Photo: Alexis Haines.



with my impairment to enrol on a degree course for dance and professional practice. I eventually graduated from Coventry University with a 2:1 (Hons). Everything changed and my determination and belief became my reality. During my graduation year, I felt finally recognised for my uniquenes as I was sought out specially, as one the country’s then few experienced disabled dancers, to be flung into the wonderful whirlwind of dance company, Foot in Hand.

Eight disabled and non-disabled dancers of varying ages and ethnicities, we had the privilege of being one of the first two inclusive ensembles in high level choreographic competition The Place Prize (sponsored by Bloomberg), something I had never previously dreamed of doing. I lived for and loved my three years as a performer in Foot In Hand. Looking back it was probably the best time I’ll ever have performing.

It was through leading and demonstrating in workshops with Foot In Hand I then found my passion for community dance, which is still and will probably always remain the reason I do what I do now.

So what is it I do now?

My regular ‘bread-and-butter’ work is running workshops and classes in schools, helping disabled and non-disabled children to see that there really is no obstacle to self expression; that working with passion, commitment and self-belief can open doors that a person never knew even existed.

Doing this work has expanded my horizons in ways I never could have predicted. Working with Midlands dance agency, Fabric in Birmingham saw me back at Hereward 20 years on leading a dance group in my own right and performing in the 2022 Birmingham International Dance Festival and the Commonwealth Games opening ceremony.

It also led to me working as part of Coventry’s Off Balance Dance company to choreograph a segment of the opening ceremony for the International Children’s Games here in the city, a piece developed over five intense days and performed by a mixed group of disabled and non-disabled children whose >>



Steph Sandy & Anna Quested-Jones. Photo: Author's own collection.

"There really is no obstacle to self expression; that working with passion, commitment and self-belief can open doors that a person never knew even existed."

only link to each other was the project. This led to me getting to know some of the sweetest and funniest people I've ever met in specialist disability schools and showing them that wheelchairs don't have to stay parked.

And it also led to me eventually losing my ability to walk on my knees, developing arthritis and being professionally confined to a wheelchair.

I was devastated.

I've faced every challenge that life has given me head-on. Like a game of poker, you can't choose the hand that life deals you but you can ALWAYS play the hand you have, no matter how hopeless it can seem. This is how I've built my dream life. I'm surrounded every day by love and beauty and something bigger than myself to work for. But dance was the spice that made everything that little bit tastier. Children dance before they talk, music and movement together speak directly to the soul. It had always been a part of me. Now, despite all I'd given myself, I felt bereft of the thing I most loved. So I tried not to love it.

The fact that I'm writing this article tells you badly I failed at that! How is thanks to stubborn, tenacious, committed and wonderful friends and colleagues, Suzanne Cantwell-Birkin and Alexis Haines of Off Balance (for which I am now associate artist).

Can't dance anymore? Awaken it in other people instead! Through Alexis and Suzanne, I learned the technicalities not of performing dance, but making it.

Michelangelo spoke of how he wouldn't carve an angel out of a block of marble, but would release it from inside. Dance was always inside me and Off Balance taught me how chisel it out. We've experimented together with the Simpson Board, designed by fellow Hereward alumnus and dance artist with CP, Lisa Simpson, to enable the expression of movement without the ability to move oneself. Every week my brilliant colleagues bring my choreographic dreams that little bit closer to realisation.

I work in committees now and on boards. I help develop dance as a professional practice. I see other talented people working to the same goals and I make sure that my experiences can shape the life and career of the next generation of disabled dance artists; ensure that the doors I've opened stay so wide open that no-one knows they're there. I see my own dancers listening to my vision and helping to shape it as they go.

I see the individuals, who like my first employer Foot in Hand, constantly push the door to dance to open wider for people like me every year. I see community dance companies introducing new people to the joy of dancing, from the groups of older people still unsure how safe the world is post-pandemic to the children who cannot express with words that which movement so beautifully shows.

I can no longer move in the same way, but dance can still move me and I hope that my work will move dance itself. As my family and my life have shown me, I always did and always will have big dreams. I now know how vital it is for more than just me to share the story of how they led me here and to let them keep leading me on.