

# The healing power of dance

Former ballerina uses movement to help people with Parkinson's, dementia

KEVIN CONNOR

When professional ballerina Rachel Bar hung up her pointe shoes, she became a scientist who focuses on pioneering ways to improve the lives of those with dementia or Parkinson's disease through dance.

After graduating from Canada's National Ballet School (NBS) in 2002, she went on to dance the classics with the English National Ballet in the U.K. and the Israel Ballet, before retiring from the stage.

She went on to finish an undergraduate degree at York University in psychology and is now completing her PhD in clinical psychology at Ryerson University, researching the benefits of dance for older adults.

"You can take the dancer from the dance, but you can't take the dance out of the dancer," said Bar.

She started a ground-breaking MRI study which examined dancers' brains while they learned new choreography over an eight-month period.

"I found a learning curve in the brain associated with dance," she added.

Part of the brain became more active as the dance was being learned and a region of the brain less so when the choreography became more of a habit. The part of the brain that deals with habits — including speech and movement — is the region affected in Parkinson's.

**"I don't need research to know everyone should be dancing."**

Rachel Bar

"In the lab, I was looking at the change in activity and wondered if we replicated the study we did with the dancers with Parkinson's, how they would experience dance?" Bar said.

"A pilot dance program was started. We had no idea of the potential, but behaviour studies show dance is beneficial for people with Parkinson's. As soon as the pilot program was started there was a shared feeling it should be a part of the (NBS) school."

Along with her research, Bar is now the health initiatives and research consultant at the NBS and teaches classes.

"The goal is to continue to

Rachel Bar, a graduate of the National Ballet School, is completing her PhD in clinical psychology and is exploring ways dance can help people with dementia and Parkinson's. ERNEST DOROSZUK/TORONTO SUN

do research and expand and develop programs for seniors. Part of the research is mental health and dancer health. There is meaningful evidence dance is highly valuable for seniors," she said.

Parkinson's is a movement disorder and dance assists with gait movement. Bar said dance can also help those with dementia come alive.

"The sad thing about

dementia is the stigma that you are lost, lost the capacity to have joy in your life. Dance gives them the opportunity to experience joy," Bar said.

"If they dance to *Take Me Out To The Ball Game*, they start telling about their memories. It doesn't matter if they remember me (from classes) week to week. They are present in that moment."

All the NBS programs are

developed with Baycrest Health Sciences, a research and teaching hospital for seniors.

The NBS has trained facilitators to lead dance classes for seniors.

"The classes are the highlight of my week. I don't need research to know everyone should be dancing. This has helped me remember why I fell in love with this art form."

**Making dance 'accessible to everyone'**

A passion stirs in Ashleigh Powell when she sees a spark in a child who is exposed to dance.

As the manager of Sharing Dance — a program at Canada's National Ballet School (NBS) — her goal is to expose children to the joy of dance.

"It's been an evolution, but the school is committed long-term to this type of engagement. We want dance to be accessible to everyone," Powell said.

There is also the hope a child may one day take centre stage.

"The first moment of discovery is really special when dance resonates with a child and you see future talent," Powell said.

Many children have no access to dance, but NBS instructors go out into the community and schools to share the art.

Toronto's Rose Avenue Public School in St. James Town is surrounded by 22 apartment towers and home to 27,000 residents, making it the most densely populated community in North America.

"There are so many benefits when a child can tap into their creative side," said Catherine Inglis, a Grade 6 teacher at the school.

Rose students took part in the NBS Sharing Dance Day last week where thousands of students across the country danced to the same choreography they learned throughout the year.

— Kevin Connor



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