

# Dance

• Continued from Page 1E

ing patients feel less isolated in their diagnosis. These classes create opportunities to rediscover the joy of movement — something that many with Parkinson's may feel slipping away.

## ABOUT PARKINSON'S

Dopamine is the neurotransmitter responsible for the rush of happiness we feel when we see a loved one, the excitement of enjoying our favorite meal, and the simple joy of sunlight warming our face. For those diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, the loss of dopamine disrupts these positive feelings. While the exact cause of Parkinson's remains unknown, its progression is gradual. But with medication and professional support, the disease can be managed, allowing many people to live fulfilling lives.

Early symptoms often include slight tremors, loss of balance and reduced facial expressions. As the condition advances, patients might experience slowed movement, rigid muscles, speech changes, difficulty with automatic movements such as blinking or

smiling, and further challenges with balance.

As Parkinson's disease gradually lessens physical abilities, it also affects the patient's mental health. Depression and anxiety are common symptoms experienced by patients. The loss of dopamine-producing neurons reduces the ability to feel joy, often accompanied with sleep disturbances and memory loss.

## THE INSPIRATION

Stalcup founded Arkansas Festival Ballet:Arkansas Academy of Dance 25 years ago — serving as an artistic director, teacher and mentor to countless students. Her work in the arts took on new meaning last year when she was inspired by her friend, Scott D. McGehee — founding director of Accademia dell'Arte in Tuscany, Italy. McGehee's program offers scholarships for undergraduate and graduate students to pursue their degrees while nurturing their artistic passions.

When McGehee was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease, Stalcup witnessed how the disease can affect an individual's everyday life.

"Seeing a friend who has such a passion for the arts be diagnosed with this disease caused me to become interest-

ed in its effects. I wanted to be able to be the best support system I could be for Scott. This is really what inspired me to get involved in Dance for Parkinson's," Stalcup explains.

Motivated by the personal connection, Stalcup began researching how she could support individuals living with Parkinson's.

"I have been teaching and inspiring children and young adults for most of my life. I began to think about how I could make a lasting impact on my community — I have the network, the space and the time to make this difference."

Her search led her to the Mark Morris Dance Group in New York, which pioneered the internationally recognized Dance for Parkinson's program more than 30 years ago. After reaching out, Stalcup completed their specialized teacher training, preparing herself to bring the program's benefits to Arkansas. She also collaborated with doctors at the University of Arkansas for Medical Sciences to learn more about the disease.

In January, Stalcup launched her first Parkinson's dance class at Arkansas Festival Ballet:Arkansas Academy of Dance. Through her UAMS connections, doctors distributed fliers

to patients, helping spread the word. What started as a single Thursday class from 1:30-2:30 p.m. has now grown to an additional class on Mondays 10:30-11:30 a.m. All classes are free.

## THE CLASS

Having a background in dance, I was both excited and honored to observe what the Parkinson's class at Arkansas Festival Ballet:Arkansas Academy of Dance was all about. When I arrived, I was greeted by Stalcup, whose energy was immediately infectious. She gave me a quick tour of the studios and explained what the class would include.

As students began to arrive, I noticed right away that this was less of a "class" and more of a community. Before the movement even began, the eight participants, Stalcup and I gathered together to share updates from the week — stories about family, new medications or tips from their doctors.

"Something I've noticed has been especially beneficial about this class is how individuals share what they've learned about their diagnosis," Stalcup says. "Whether that's advice from a doctor or personal experience, the community connection is just as important as the movement.

Many of my students are also connected to UAMS in some way — through family, work or their own background in neurological health."

After catching up, we moved into the studio and arranged our chairs in a circle. The class began with slow, gentle movements set to classical music. Imagery played a central role — stretching our arms like rays of the sun or floating our hands like birds in the wind.

"Through my training, conversations with professionals and feedback from students, I've learned that imagery is a powerful tool for therapy," Stalcup said. "Because Parkinson's affects dopamine neurons, reimagining those feelings through imagery helps patients escape their worries and focus on the beauty of everyday life."

We started seated, then gradually transitioned to standing, practicing different strategies for rising from a chair — a common challenge for those with Parkinson's. Still in a circle, we mirrored each other's movements, building on the imagery we had explored earlier.

"Mirroring and repetition play a large role in muscle memory," Stalcup explains. "Repeating movements strengthens the muscles while

building confidence."

Later, we shifted to face the mirror. Following Stalcup's lead, each movement was paired with an image from nature and guided by music — from lively New Orleans jazz to serene classical pieces. The tempo changed with the music and so did our movements. One of my favorite moments was watching how each student interpreted the imagery differently: When asked to mirror the ocean, some created quick, shallow waves, while others stretched into long, slow breakers.

We moved across the studio, experimenting with facial expressions and expressive arm gestures to tell stories through movement. The class closed the same way it began — in community. Standing in a circle and holding hands, we imagined passing a hummingbird from person to person, each interpretation as unique as the individual.

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