

Frequent Dancing: Proven Protection Against Dementia

National Ballroom Community Prepares to Step Up for Seniors

BY EMBER REICHGOTT JUNGE

WHETHER YOU ARE A LEADER OR Follower, partner dance involves split-second, rapid-fire decision-making. It isn't rote memory or just working on your physical style. You make choices. It's not automatic. You use active intelligence and attention because you have multiple options and you don't already know what to do.

That's why frequent dancing provides the greatest risk reduction of dementia of any activity studied, cognitive or physical, according to the 2003 study of senior citizens 75+, led by Albert Einstein College of Medicine in New York City and reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. As described by Richard Powers in "Use It or Lose It: Dancing Makes you Smarter, Longer," researchers evaluated cognitive activities such as reading books, writing for pleasure, doing crossword puzzles, playing cards and playing musical instruments over a 21-year period. They also studied physical activities, like playing tennis or golf, swimming, bicycling, dancing, walking for exercise, and doing housework.

None of the physical activities appeared to offer any protection against dementia except one: frequent dancing. That provided more protection than any other studied activity, cognitive or physical.

Check out these results:

Activity	Reduced Risk of Dementia
Bicycling	0%
Swimming	0%
Golf	0%
Reading	35%
Crossword Puzzles at least 4 days per week	47%
Frequent Partner Dancing	76%

Why is that? According to Powers, "Our brain constantly rewires its neural pathways, as needed. If it doesn't need to, then it won't. Do whatever you can to create new neural paths." As people age, random brain cells die. If there is only one well-worn pathway in the brain, it can be completely blocked when certain cells die. "But those who spent their lives trying

Nancy Westcott, board member of the Northern California chapter of the Alzheimer's Association, dances with Arthur Murray Bay Area Franchise Owner Chris Lynam in support of The Longest Day, the Alzheimer's Association's largest fundraiser. Photo provided by Nancy Westcott.



different mental routes each time, creating a myriad of possible paths, still have several paths left," Powers wrote.

Do all forms of dancing provide the same cognitive benefits? No. Dance that merely works on style or retraces the same memorized paths does not. While Powers concedes that dance can generally provide stress-reduction, cardiovascular benefits, and socialization benefits, this study found that partner dancing "encourages you to use your *full* intelligence when dancing, in both the Lead and Follow roles. The more decision-making we can bring into our dancing, the better." And benefits are greatly enhanced by dancing with different partners.

Bringing Dance to Seniors Living with Alzheimer's

Ballroom dance professional Esther Frances knew the effects of Alzheimer's first-hand, as she watched family members go through it. "I have seen how quickly people can decline if they don't act. People sometimes think 'acting' is taking medicine or seeing a doctor, but acting is being more active and taking care of yourself and doing something like dancing

that can have so many different benefits. I really wanted to try and bring that to more people,” she said.

So in 2019, Esther, manager and dance instructor at an Arthur Murray Dance Studio in Manhattan, stepped up. She partnered with an early-stage social engagement program offered by the Alzheimer’s Association, New York City Chapter, to create a pilot program at her dance studio. They ran the five-week program (two sessions per week) several times before the pandemic hit. It wasn’t easy.

Esther would book group classes, engage four or five volunteer staff, and learn new ways to teach, without funding or compensation. Teachers were trained by the Alzheimer’s Association before starting. They soon found that this was not about teaching basic ballroom dance—it was more movement-based and repetitive. They started with the basic Merengue and moved to Argentine Tango. Then students performed at pre-scheduled studio showcases.

How is teaching people with memory loss different from other students? It is different in three ways, says Esther. First, people with Alzheimer’s experience problems with balance, which means multiple staff professionals are needed to teach the class and physically help students balance so they can learn the steps. Students began by marching side to side, learning their bodies and posture, and “by the end they actually could do basic steps,” recalled Esther.

Second, multiple approaches are needed. Though music is “super helpful” for some, “You have to play music, you have to use numbers, you have to use vocals; most respond a lot better with touch. We had to find ways that are safe for everybody.”

Finally, touch was key. Continued Esther, “You have to help them feel where to go. You help them balance and depending on their state of Alzheimer’s they have different levels on their standing leg. You can tell them what a back step is, or just help people move through it. You have to be able to physically do that.”

Caregivers can help their partners. “The caregivers had such an amazing time. It was fun for them to have a mental break where they could just have fun with each other. A break from caregiving is so important. People forget that,” added Esther.

And the dancers? “They loved it. They loved the music, the movement, and the dancing. They loved the whole activity, like getting dressed, coming to the studio, getting dressed for a show, getting a pair of dance shoes, doing make up and hair, and doing the performance.”

Did she see evidence of results? “I did see the difference,” said Esther. “You might have somebody at the beginning of the class who could barely stand on their two feet, and then a couple weeks later they are doing a tango basic. I would say that’s a pretty big success. But you have to maintain it.”

Unfortunately, the pandemic hit, and the program didn’t continue. Esther moved to Florida and became an independent instructor. She is still passionate about the idea, and is now working with a wellness center that serves Alzheimer’s patients to bring the programming back in Florida. Esther hopes that will happen by late spring or summer of 2022, when the virus risk abates.

But the pandemic is not the only barrier. “There is a lack of funding for these programs,” said Esther. “Our project was volunteer-based, and volunteers had to be certified to work with people with Alzheimer’s. And on their end, the Alzheimer’s Association didn’t have enough staff or caregivers to bring the patients to the studio.”

Arthur Murray Dance Studios: Global Partner to Alzheimer’s Association

Ironically, and coincidentally, Nancy Westcott, an Arthur Murray student on the West Coast, was already attempting to tackle the funding problem. She was also a board member of the Northern California and Northern Nevada chapter of the Alzheimer’s Association, the largest chapter in the nation. As a dancer with her husband, she had read about the benefits of dance for people with dementia. So she approached Chris and Daisey Lynam, who owned several Arthur Murray studios in the Greater Bay Area. Chris had just lost a beloved aunt to



Nancy Westcott joins Chris Lynam in 2018, in announcing Arthur Murray Dance Studios as a Global Team fundraising partner of the national Alzheimer’s Association. Photo provided by Nancy Westcott.

Alzheimer's, and he and Daisey rallied to the cause. They conducted fundraisers and awareness events in their studios and engaged others in the Arthur Murray network, raising \$50,000 in 2017, their first year.

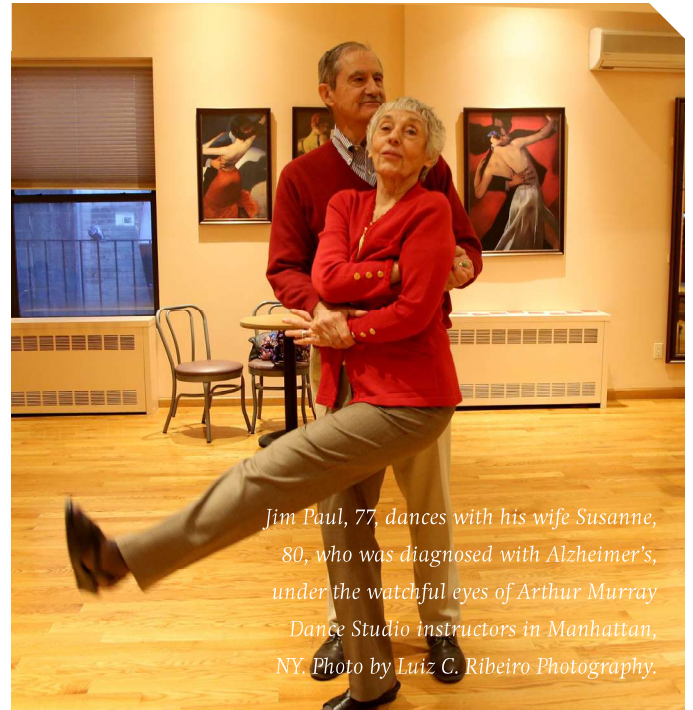
They weren't done. In January of 2018, Chris and Nancy, in full ballroom dress, attended the Alzheimer's Association Leadership Summit in New Orleans to announce that Arthur Murray Dance Studios would become a Global Team fundraising partner of the Alzheimer's Association. "That was fabulous!" recalled Nancy. "That year there were about 112 participating studios, including studios in Italy and Australia, and they raised \$212,000. That was a big year! When you add it all up, even with Covid, to date Arthur Murray Dance Studios has raised \$430,000 for Alzheimer's research and programming."

Scaling Up Dance Programming: Serving More Seniors with Dementia

With the need so great and the results so clear, how do we scale up dance programming so that more seniors with dementia can be served? Yes, several small pilot programs have succeeded in Minnesota (see the March 2022 issue of *Sheer Dance*) and in New York City, and perhaps in other places. But there does not appear to be a coordinated effort to scale up this proven activity that prevents dementia and connect existing philanthropic partners such as Arthur Murray Dance Studios. At least until now.

Enter ballroom professional Wayne Eng, Chief Executive Officer of Dance Vision (online producer of ballroom dance education materials) and Chairman of the prestigious Emerald Ball Dancesport Championship in Los Angeles. Three years

ago, Wayne created the Dance Vision Foundation, with the goal to provide dance as therapy at no cost for those who need it and can't afford it. The Foundation will eventually aid people with Alzheimer's and all other dementia, Parkinson's, mental health conditions, stroke, and any other condition that can benefit from ballroom dance. Wayne hired dance instructor Brandy Bangs of Northwest Arkansas as Executive Director of the Foundation. Said Brandy of Wayne, "He's a very successful businessman, and I know he feels passionately about giving



Jim Paul, 77, dances with his wife Susanne, 80, who was diagnosed with Alzheimer's, under the watchful eyes of Arthur Murray Dance Studio instructors in Manhattan, NY. Photo by Luiz C. Ribeiro Photography.



The New York City Chapter of the Alzheimer's Association partnered with Arthur Murray Dance Studio in Manhattan to bring Merengue and Tango lessons to those living with Alzheimer's in February of 2019. Photo by Luiz C. Ribeiro Photography.



Manager and Dance Instructor Esther Frances initiated group lessons for those living with Alzheimer's at her Manhattan Arthur Murray studio in 2019. Frances has since moved to Florida and is working to create a program there as an independent studio. Photo by Luiz C. Ribeiro Photography.

back. He wants to give the benefit that dance has given him and so many others to people who wouldn't necessarily have access to it and to people who need it probably more than any of us."

Alzheimer's is close to Brandy's heart. "I have a high rate of Alzheimer's on both sides of my family," she said. "It's almost a guarantee in my family, partly because we have a lot of longevity. I can't afford to stop dancing, ever. It is the one thing that I know will at least reduce my chances, and slow down the onset of Alzheimer's."

As the only full-time Foundation employee, Brandy is creating curricula for dance teachers and organizing pilot programs in local senior facilities that she and others will teach. She is consulting with a physical therapist, home health nurse, and others with the goal of adding movements and instructions to the current Dance Vision online curricula that are specific to various conditions.

"For example, we'll add arm movements at right angles to the body. That reconnects the different hemispheres of the brain and helps to delay the [dementia] progression. We'll add movements that promote the healing process for the condition, especially for group classes where people are not connected to a partner, or for people who dance from a seat or wheelchair," explained Brandy. Instructions will help teachers teach in a different way. "For example, you need more physical repetition for someone with Alzheimer's. You need movement that is connected to specific music, not simply background music."

The new syllabus will eventually serve seniors living with Alzheimer's and other dementia, and seniors with other conditions such as Parkinson's or stroke recovery. "We will have curriculum specific to different needs," said Brandy. "I think that's part of the problem with dancing as it is. Instructors tend to teach the syllabus instead of teaching the student. With these conditions, you have to teach a completely different way."

Brandy is also in the start-up process of piloting these programs in local retirement homes and senior memory facilities in her Northwest Arkansas area. Not all participants will be dementia patients. She will start on-site to make sure students feel safe in their environments. All instructors certified for the program will also be certified in CPR and First Aid. The pilot will provide dance services as well as research for how the program helps and affects those who have dementia. The Dance Vision Foundation will cover the costs.

Assuming the pilot proves successful in Arkansas, Brandy will personally recruit dance professionals from different areas of the country to expand the program. Her goal is to start expanding in one year, depending on fundraising. And her vision for scaling up the program? "My vision is to have this be a program that specifically independent studios can take in, much like the way the Dance Vision syllabus has been. It's something that will be available to individual teachers and independent studios," Brandy said.

Kudos to Dance Vision, Arthur Murray Dance Studios, and all the dance professionals leading the way in recent years to bring the benefits of partner dance to seniors living with Alzheimer's and other dementia. The possibilities are endless; the vision is real. The ballroom dance community will soon have every opportunity to step up to serve their senior dancer communities. Why not start laying the groundwork for your community today?

Ember Reichgott Junge is an amateur competitive ballroom dancer and co-founder of the nonprofit Heart of Dance. She invites story ideas for her book-in-progress, tentatively titled Stories of Resilience from the Ballroom Dancer's Heart. E



Photo by Luiz C. Ribeiro Photography.