

Art Beyond Sight Awareness Month

October 2011: Alert IV

A special thank you to this past Monday's Telephone Conference Crash Course participants! The teleconference was a huge success because of the excellence of the many guest speakers. We hope all of you who called into the free teleconference have been inspired to find new, innovative ways to improve access for all to your programs.

We welcome suggestions for topics to be covered in Next Year's Awareness Month Crash Course. Please send them to Marie Clapot at aeb@artbeyondsight.org.

Dance program for people with Parkinson's disease

The Mark Morris Dance Group (MMDG), headquartered in New York City, and the Brooklyn Parkinson Group (BPG) began offering free dance classes for people with Parkinson's disease in the Fall of 2001. Since 2005, the two organizations have expanded the Dance for PD[®] program into more than 40 other communities around the world; master classes, for instance, are available in San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley, Louisville, Ann Arbor, Seattle, Denver, Toronto, Edinburgh, London, Auckland, and Tel Aviv, among others. Medical centers in Seattle, Louisville, Champaign-Urbana, and Boston have also hosted Dance for PD demonstration classes in their facilities. Here, David Leventhal, Program Manager, Dance for PD at Mark Morris Dance Company, tells us more about this exciting program.

Art Beyond Sight (ABS): *How did the initiative come about?*

David Leventhal (D.L.): In 2001, Olie Westheimer, the Executive Director of the Brooklyn Parkinson Group, approached the Mark Morris Dance Group with the idea for a real dance class for members of her group. Olie felt that people with Parkinson's spent lots of time thinking and talking about Parkinson's, shuttling between doctors' and therapists' offices. She wanted people to do something positive together, and she had a hunch that a dance class, taught by professional dancers, was that thing. We started with one class a

month – taught by two dancers from the Mark Morris Dance Group and accompanied by a professional musician – for about six people. Ten years later, we have a weekly class – provided free of charge – for anywhere between 40-55 people with Parkinson's, their families, friends and carepartners at the Mark Morris Dance Center in Brooklyn. And the program has been replicated in more than 45 communities around the world. The intriguing thing about our program is that on the one hand, it has nothing to do with Parkinson's – we don't talk about or address symptoms head on. But because of the way dancing and dance training are structured, the class has everything to do with Parkinson's. Dance fits Parkinson's like a glove – but when you're in the class, people tell us they only notice the glove, not the Parkinson's.

ABS: *Would you speak about the benefits of dance for people with PD and describe a general dance class?*

D.L: I'm going to speak to the benefits that we teaching artists observe. Certainly there are benefits that the scientific community is beginning to explore in some preliminary studies – improvement in gait, reduction of tremor, improved stability and short-term mobility, increased facial expression, and a sense of social inclusion – but more serious research is needed. What we observe, day in and day out, is that people become more accomplished dancers. They're able to sequence movement more easily, and move with increased grace, confidence and musicality. They learn specific repertory and technique, and get to develop a sense of mastery over the movement and their bodies. Of course dance addresses very specific issues that start to go away with a Parkinson's diagnosis, but primarily we're interested in the change of attitude that comes when people with Parkinson's engage in an artistic learning environment like a dance class. Suddenly, they are surrounded by a world of possibility, not limitation, and it's liberating and inspiring for them and for us.

ABS: *I understand that Dance for PD now has 40 affiliated satellites programs across the US and in 7 countries! Who/what was the force behind this success?*

D.L: There are many people who have worked tirelessly to nurture those affiliated programs. First and foremost, people with Parkinson's in the local communities have asked for this program and we have worked with our collaborators, new and old, in these areas to build a program around the participants' requests. The fact that the Mark

Morris Dance Group includes Dance for PD classes as part of its touring outreach program has played a significant role in the expansion of the program. Since 2003, we've been introducing the idea of Dance for PD in cities where we have regular performing engagements, and over time that has developed into significant interest among people in these cities for a regular, on-going program. So in 2007, we started to train other dance teachers to do this work, and we've since trained hundreds of people from around the world. Not all of them have started classes – it can be a time-intensive process – but we work as a team to support those who would like to work with us to develop a sustainable program in other cities. We've also received some comprehensive coverage in the national media over the years, and many people have learned about the program from our appearance on PBS NewsHour and other programs. Finally, our informational film called *Why Dance for PD* (and viewable on our website www.danceforpd.org) has been viewed by thousands of people and has inspired many to want to take or teach a class in their own communities.

ABS: *How would you like the program evolve?*

D.L: We'd like to see Dance for PD become a completely accepted part of what people with Parkinson's do to stay well. Because Parkinson's is such a complex and multi-focal chronic illness, people fare better when they participate in a variety of physical and cognitive modalities to maintain their quality of life and try to manage their symptoms for as long as possible. Dance is a relative newcomer to the field, since most of the focus has been on exercise and fitness-based programs, but dance's unique ability to bridge the physical, mental and emotional realms – all in the spirit of playfulness, fun, and musicality – means that more and more people are accepting it as an essential part of the PD wellness portfolio. When we started out, we got some rather strange looks from the medical community, who were rather skeptical. That initial skepticism is giving way to sustained interest, and we'd love to see a time when dance is seen as a Best Practice for people with Parkinson's. We're not there yet, but we're doing everything we can to get there.

ABS: *Is there any moment, story, or words from your experience with dancers that stays with you?*

D.L: Every class is filled with enough moments to sustain us for many weeks. Simply seeing peoples' sense of joy and confidence in their

approach to movement by the end of class compared with how they seem at the start is inspiring. We often hear, "This makes me so happy," or "It's really nice not to think about Parkinson's when I'm here." I love the words of one of our PD dancers in California named Luanne: "When I first heard of this group I was so touched and surprised that anyone would think of something so magnificent and drastic as trying to teach all of us slowpokes to dance. What a marvel...I had pretty much settled into my life as a wallflower. If there is anything that sidelines you, exacerbates your sense of constriction and inhibition, it is Parkinson's. If there is anything that calls for expression, demonstration, drama, movement, expression and liveliness, it is dance. What mad person first thought of combining such dead opposites. I'm awash with curiosity but also with sheer gratitude that they thought of us and made this magic happen. I can't tell you what a treasure it is, how much it means to me that someone should even suspect us of sequestering ballerinas in our hidden hearts but they do exist and how kind of you to ask us to dance. It truly means so much."



Up: David Leventhal teaches a Dance for PD class at the Mark Morris Dance Center. Photo by Rosalie O'Connor.
Right: Members of the Brooklyn Parkinson Group at the Mark Morris Dance Center. Photo by Amber Star



To learn more about Mark Morris Dance Company and programs, go to: <http://danceforparkinsons.org/about-the-program>

http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/health/july-dec10/parkinson_12-09.html

http://markmorrisdancegroup.org/the_dance_center/outreach?gclid=CNyjsaqr3qsCFYpM4Aod9U8FPg

UPDATE ON THE MULTI-SITE MUSEUM STUDY, A PROJECT OF THE ART BEYOND SIGHT MUSEUM INSTITUTE

The first part of this multi-year, multi-site study consisted included a series of focus groups carried out by the Museum of Science, Boston Research and Evaluation Department (MOS) and Art Beyond Sight with museum visitors who are blind or have low vision. The purpose of these focus groups was to gather information that can inform the development of pilot museum programs that meet the needs and interests of visitors who are blind or have low vision and to provide professional development for museum professionals. Focus groups occurred at seven major art museums: the Brooklyn Museum; the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum; the Indianapolis Museum of Art; the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston; the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art; and the Seattle Art Museum.

The report, titled "Speaking Out on Art and Museums: Study on the Needs and Preferences of Adults who Are Blind or Have Low Vision," was written by Christine Reich, Anna Lindgren-Streicher, Marta Beyer, Nina Levent, Joan Muyskens Pursley, and Leigh Ann Mesiti. It is available online at:

<http://www.artbeyondsight.org/new/speaking-out-on-art-and-museums.shtml>

SAVE-THE-DATE: Friday-Sunday, October 26-28, 2012

Mark Your Calendars ... The next Art Beyond Sight International Conference, cosponsored by Art Beyond Sight and The Metropolitan Museum of Art, will be held on October 26 to 28, 2012 at The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

The registration form and schedule will be posted on the conference's blog:

<http://artbeyondsightconference.blogspot.com/>

If you would like to receive automatic updates on the conference, please send an email to aeb@artbeyondsight.org with your name and contact information; please title it "conference" in the subject line.
