IU’s Contemporary Dance program is offering a dance class for people with Parkinson’s disease. The class is held in the Windfall Dance Studios. David Snodgress | Herald-Times

Jim Allee dances with Geneva Moore. IU’s Contemporary Dance program is offering a dance class for people with Parkinson’s disease. David Snodgress | Herald-Times
David and Weezie Smith mimic movements during IU’s Contemporary Dance program which offers a dance class for people with Parkinson’s disease. David Snodgress | Herald-Times

Sarah and Richard Hatch dance during IU’s Contemporary Dance program which has a dance class for people with Parkinson’s disease. David Snodgress | Herald-Times
BLOOMINGTON — Not even the bitterest cold of the year could keep members of one of Bloomington’s newest and warmest groups away from class.

The small but committed band of regulars for Dance for Parkinson’s, all affected either directly or indirectly by the disease, converged on their classroom — the dance studio for Windfall Dancers — to push back against the ailment’s creeping physical effects through improvised song and dance.

The original “regular,” Mary-Louise “Weezie” Smith, ascends Windfall’s short staircase and collects herself at the top, beaming. Her energy is infectious.

That energy is a principal reason the group exists.

Getting schooled

Smith, diagnosed with Parkinson’s in 2003, has spearheaded the effort to bring the burgeoning alternative dance class to Bloomington, first learning about it via a 2010 feature on PBS’s NewsHour.

Refusing to be stopped by the degenerative condition, Smith contacted program manager and founding teacher David Leventhal at his Brooklyn headquarters, where the program had begun in 2001.

Leventhal not only encouraged her to establish a local chapter in Bloomington, but advised her on how to go about it.

One of her first moves was to contact Elizabeth Shea, head of the Contemporary Dance program at Indiana University and a professor in the department of kinesiology.

Shea already had heard of Dance for Parkinson’s from a number of dance and social media outlets.

“I knew the program sounded fantastic and had also heard it featured on one of the morning shows on television,” Shea said. “Then I received a call last spring from Weezie, who is a Professor Emeritus at the [Jacobs] School of Music. She said she had Parkinson’s, had read about this wonderful program, and wanted to know if the IU department of kinesiology would offer a class like that here.”

The first obstacle was finding an instructor; while dance experience is not required of the participants, the classes are structured and taught by individuals who have undergone the proper training.

Serendipitously, an adjunct faculty member living in Indianapolis, Roberta Wong, had recently completed the certification process and was interested. With that significant hurdle cleared, the next was finding a classroom.

“We knew that we needed space that was appropriate for individuals with Parkinson’s,” Shea said. “It needed a piano, but it also needed to be wheelchair-accessible and had to have easy parking. Spaces at the university were so booked that we had to contact Windfall Dance, which has so far turned out to be the perfect site.”

Last September, with an instructor, a location, a pianist and funding — courtesy of both IU and Smith’s tireless effort — all finally secured, the inaugural class got under way. Among the six attendees that
afternoon were Smith, her husband David, Elizabeth, and two others who are now regulars, Richard and Sara Hatch. For Richard Hatch and for Smith, this would be their first foray onto a dance floor in decades.

Learning to dance

“There was some trepidation at first; a few maybe even felt a little self-conscious,” Shea said. “The ice melted quickly, though, as everyone became comfortable and confident. Everyone was in the same boat.”

After spending many hours together over the past four months, sometimes with hands clasped as they go through the routines, members have shed much of their performance anxiety — but none of their enthusiasm.

On this winter morning, Wong summons the dancers to the room’s hallowed inner circle of folding chairs, the space transforming into a venue for interactive memory activity. The instructor throws her arms up toward the ceiling, then lets them fall gracefully as they weave to and fro, tracing an invisible double helix. All the while, Wong exhales gently and vocalizes her name, turning it into a soft, reassuring mantra as the sound escapes her lips.

With that, the floodgates open; one by one, each person follows her lead, inventing a unique gesture and accompanying it with his or her name. By the time the circle has worked its way back to Wong, each gesture has become part of a greater chain of gestures, a mix of joy and relief for the dancers.

“It is emphasized that Dance for Parkinson’s is not therapy,” says Wong, who said the class has been by far the most pleasant she has ever taught. “It’s more a structured program that has proven to be effective in helping those with Parkinson’s deal with their symptoms, find others they can feel comfortable around and share experiences with, and create a safe place to have fun and take part in a community.”

Though she has only been commuting to class since last fall, Smith can already attest to its positive effects.

“It’s hard to say what life would be like without (the program), but it’s definitely helped because I think I have more of a sense of rhythm now,” Smith said. “I don’t fall as much. ... This helps with that and lets you express yourself artistically in a way you wouldn’t be able to otherwise.”

Finding common ground

Richard Hatch, who has Parkinson’s, describes his wife, who does not, as a loyal supporter. The couple that once traversed the country to attend art fairs has yet to miss a class, which Richard looks forward to every week.

“Oh, it’s very important that we all participate in some kind of exercise routines together,” Hatch said. “Suddenly you realize you’re not the only one who has (Parkinson’s).”
Smith, who encouraged Hatch to attend the class after first meeting in an aquatic class, sees great value in the camaraderie among Parkinson’s sufferers in avoiding a feeling of isolation.

“You see other people struggling with the same thing, and then you realize that you’re really lucky — at least I think I am,” Smith said. “I had symptoms for years before I was diagnosed, so I had probably had it for a while, but it seems to be going very slowly.”

Observing from her embedded perspective, Wong has seen the resilience of the dancers on full display. Once, the group discussed a fellow participant’s change in medication with the same candor they use when speaking of their acceptance of life with the disease as a “new journey.”

“They are a very self-accepting and understanding community,” Wong said. “They appreciate other people to a very high degree and are very grateful. There is a strength in dealing with the everyday challenges that is impressive.”

**The future of dance**

Classes similar to Dance for Parkinson’s, which in 12 years has grown to more than 75 chapters internationally, may continue to grow as lifespan lengthens and as the number of elderly, the segment of the population most afflicted with Parkinson’s, also grows.

Whether by coincidence or design, no fewer than four communities with a sizable university presence — Ann Arbor, Berkeley, Urbana-Champaign, and Bloomington — have welcomed Dance for Parkinson’s classes in recent years. The possibility of adding a research element to the program is one Shea said she and her colleagues have begun to consider.

Elizabeth said she and husband and colleague John Shea, director of the ergonomics laboratory in kinesiology, and the department’s chairman, have talked about the potential to streamline the program and facilitate cooperation among all local groups interested in and affected by Parkinson’s disease.

“It’s on the agenda,” she said. “To have the class in a college town is definitely a nice advantage. Lots of folks do choose to come to Bloomington to retire; there’s a real opportunity for progress here.”

As for the immediate future, Shea said that while the program is fine in its present state, expansion is the goal.

“We’d love to reach outside of the Bloomington population, raise money to find transportation for folks in Bedford or Ellettsville,” Shea said. “This is a great service to the state of Indiana and we’d love to expand the offering.”

Whatever path the program takes, Smith, Hatch and their companions will continue to waltz, kick and glide their way across Windfall’s dance floor at their own measured pace, evidence that even in the face of a disease that threatens to sap the spirit, people can still brim with triumphant human expression.
What is Parkinson’s disease?

Parkinson's disease is a neurological condition that affects movement, causing shaking and difficulty with motor function. One of the most common nervous system disorders among the elderly, it usually develops after age 50. Parkinson’s occurs when nerve cells responsible for making dopamine, a chemical that controls muscle movement, cease to work properly. As a result, messages sent by these damaged nerve cells are scrambled and muscle function is worsened.