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Outcome Report: Dance for Parkinson's Disease

This grant provided me with the opportunity to explore the field of dance therapy and to uncover more interconnections between my academic and artistic studies. I used the grant to attend the Dance for Parkinson's enrichment program headed by The Mark Morris Dance Group and to create an artistic work inspired by my research. The Mark Morris Dance Group provides training and enrichment programs for everyone interested in the intersection of dance and Parkinson's disease. Their enrichment program is an overview of Dance for Parkinson's approaches and best practices, and it is designed to provide a comprehensive and intimate look at core components of the Dance for Parkinson's program. I used the information I acquired from my research about Parkinson's disease to inspire a dance piece that was performed in the University of Virginia's Spring Dance Concert in April 2014. My advisor through this process was Professor Kim Brooks Mata, the head and artistic director of the dance program at the University of Virginia. She mentored me through the choreographic process and provided me with resources that aided me in my exploration.

My first encounter with Parkinson's disease occurred when I shadowed a neurologist, Dr. Ray Lopez, in Miami, FL. Learning about the disease and observing the symptoms firsthand really impacted me more than anything else I experienced during my time in the hospital. Being a dancer I have always cherished my range of motion and my ability to create movement. Parkinson's disease is a chronic and progressive movement disorder. The disease affects the nerve cells in the brain that produce dopamine, a chemical that sends messages to the part of the brain that controls coordination and movement. Some symptoms of Parkinson's disease include muscle rigidity, tremors, and changes in speech and walk. The potential for dance to help reintroduce movement and coordination back into the lives of people with Parkinson's disease is what got me very excited and eager to educate myself more on the topic of dance therapy.

Once I received the grant I began my initial research into Parkinson's disease to prepare myself for the Dance for Parkinson's workshop and for the choreographic process. I read many research papers and articles about Parkinson's disease and about dance therapy. The official Dance for PD website provided me with lots of useful information, including a DVD that led me through the founding teachers favorite moves for the class they developed in collaboration with the Brooklyn Parkinson's group. I also observed a yoga for Parkinson's class at the Senior Center in Charlottesville, VA that is offered in partnership with UVa's Adult Neurology department. These resources helped me obtain a glimpse into how movement and dance therapy can be used as a means to promote ways of moving and speaking to better cope with the many symptoms of Parkinson's.

I used the information I gathered from my initial research about Parkinson's disease to inspire my dance piece. The concept I began with was the idea of not having the ability to be in control of my movement. This idea triggered my first emotional response to being struck with Parkinson's disease because as a dancer it is difficult to imagine not being in complete control over my body. I decided to work

with two dancers on a duet to further illustrate this struggle. It was titled “Hollowed out” and was performed by dancers Emily Chen and Elyssa Fonicello. I held three hours of rehearsal a week for 10 weeks in preparation for the performance.

This was my first choreographic endeavor for the dance program and definitely challenged me artistically. I have never choreographed a piece that I felt so emotionally connected to and that I felt so much pressure to execute properly. The dance was very physical and required a lot of collaborative work between my dancers and myself. It challenged me to explore ways to express my ideas and images through movement and then to transfer that movement onto two other bodies on stage. This required me as the choreographer to help my dancers attain a deep connection and high level of dedication to the execution of the movement. Overall, it was a very rewarding experience and it was amazing to watch how the piece transformed on stage. A link to video is attached at the end of this report.

The Dance for Parkinson’s workshop I attended was Aug. 2-3rd in Brooklyn, NY. My instructor was David Leventhal, the Program Director and Lead Trainer. During the workshop we heard an introduction to the program, participated in a demo class with members of the local Parkinson’s community, took part in a demo and practicum session, and covered the Dance for PD Training Modules, which included topics such as safety, class design and structure, adaptations, and many more. The main point I took away from the entire experience was that dance can be used as a way to develop confidence in individuals with Parkinson’s disease and provide them with a safe community in which to explore. Individuals diagnosed with this disease can experience discomfort and embarrassment due to the outward expression of the symptoms. They still have functional cognitive skills, and they are consciously aware of the progressive loss of control that they are experiencing over their bodies. Therefore, individuals with this disease often begin to isolate themselves and avoid social environments. This class provides the participants with the opportunity to investigate their movement potential and express themselves without feeling judged by others. They also are given the chance to challenge themselves and increase their range of motion, which can then give them insight into what they can accomplish outside of the studio.

While participating in a demo class with members of the local Parkinson’s community, it was apparent how much joy everyone was experiencing. The essence of dance is joy and you don’t have to be a professional to obtain the benefits of a dance class. Dance sparks creativity, develops flexibility and instills confidence. It stimulates mental activity that connects mind to body, invokes imagery in the service of graceful movement, increases awareness of where all parts of the body are in space, and focuses attention on eyes, ears and touch as tools to assist in movement and balance. The level of dexterity and attention necessary to carry out the exercises in a dance class are highly beneficial for individuals with Parkinson’s disease, which is why the integration of dance in combination with medication can greatly benefit their quality of life.

This grant was extremely rewarding and helped me to grow personally and artistically. I am very grateful for the Miller Arts Scholars program and the donors for making this possible.

<https://virginia.box.com/Hollowedout2014>