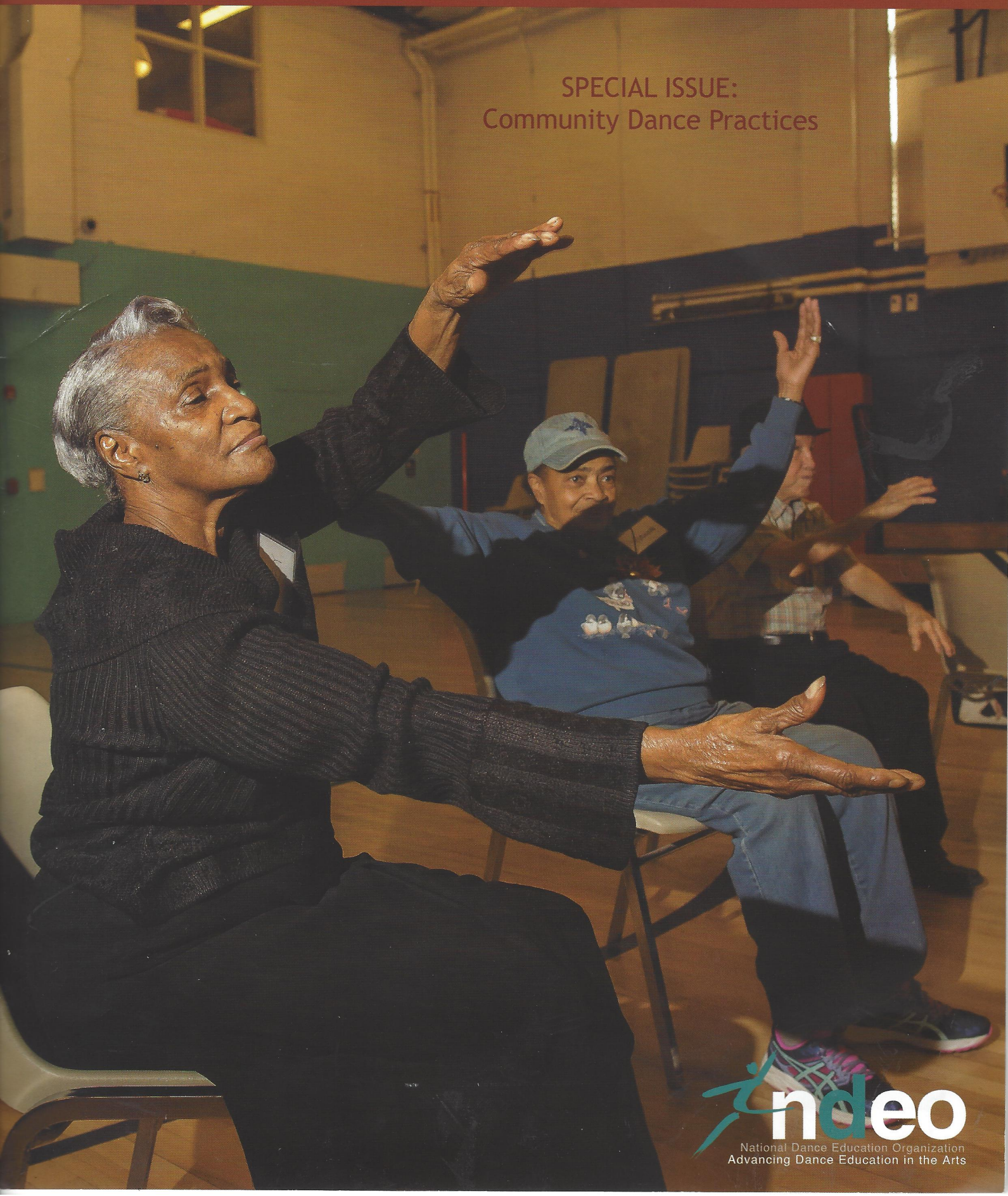


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MOVEMENT SPEAKS®

Dance Program

for Older Adults

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ABSTRACT

MOVEMENT SPEAKS®, a sequential dance program for older adults, teaches body awareness, creative mastery, better balance, and opportunity for socialization. Developed by Naomi Goldberg-Haas and the multigenerational performance company and educational organization Dances for a Variable Population, the program brings the joy of movement to hundreds of older adults throughout New York City each week.

Our population is growing and as a society it is important to think about supporting the quality of life as we age. There are not enough enriching cultural and specifically dance mastery programs available to older adults. Many people are not aware of the benefits of dance and creative movement for senior adults. Many programs are not serving low-income communities in urban areas who struggle with health and reduced social interaction. Our weekly MOVEMENT SPEAKS® programs are held in accessible public spaces such as libraries, senior centers, parks, and community centers. We also hold low-cost tuition-based programs in dance studios. Dances for a Variable Population (DVP) serves more than 2,000 seniors annually in New York City.

DVP's mission is to inspire older populations to move more and to embrace the study of dance as a viable productive activity that enhances and enriches the quality of their lives. Older adults need accessible programs that use creative movement as a means to improving balance, mobility, flexibility, strength, joyful expression, and reduction of isolation in their communities. Our MOVEMENT SPEAKS® programs are designed for the appreciation and enjoyment of moving, moving with others, and creating heightened self-expression and confidence. They take each person from where they are and move them forward, supporting a more meaningful and fulfilled sense of self. Program participants reflect a broad range of motor and cognitive skill levels and include both dance enthusiasts and total newcomers. Many dancers in this program are finding their physical voices for the first time:

I have always felt that I had a dancing heart, but I couldn't do anything about it before. Now it's my time and I will dance! I lose my inhibitions when I dance. (Sheila, age 74)

METHODS AND CHALLENGES

The MOVEMENT SPEAKS® 12- to 32-week curriculum is a sequential dance program for older adults founded by DVP in 2008. It was developed from our popular program Dances for Seniors, a single-session interactive workshop and performance with our multigenerational company (ages 25–85). We begin each 75-minute class introducing the core values of appreciating one's own body moving and moving with other people, being mindful of individual challenges and supporting difference. Our students appreciate this opportunity:

I make a commitment to myself to come to classes. They make me feel good, keep me active, and are fun! (Barbara, age 83)



Tony Dapolito Recreation Center, New York, NY. Photo credit: Kelly Stuart.

Adults have many choices and inconsistent attendance can be a challenge for these classes, so we emphasize fun as a reason to come back. Having an enjoyable experience makes return classes a must. We say all sessions are recommended but not required. This allows for health issues and family and work obligations not to interfere with our work.

I have fun doing it—it feel like I am playing like a kid. It truly captures the spirit of the thing. (Tina, age 82)

Another challenge is the assumption of “I cannot do” Teachers tell seniors we encourage modifications for the variety of bodies in the room. Teaching artists working in teams demonstrate possibilities ensuring proper alignment and confidence in each individual. Our instructors are certified in a variety of programs from American Council on Exercise to Pilates and MFA Dance programs, and are adept at finding modifications for everyone. Students soon realize the benefit of adaptation. We also say whatever you are doing is more than when you walked in, appreciating what each person has done, which inspires others. We constantly

remind folks that the group experience of dancing is special, sacred, and unlike any other physical activity.

We also need to address lateness as a challenge by allowing for flexibility with time. Many older adults need transportation assistance and have difficulty getting to class on time. We understand this and support them in allowing entry to class late, leaving empty spots in the circle and easy entry, along with a warm hello and plenty of opportunity for personal “warmup.”

Our class structures include a number of different activities that we follow in each class. We start with warmups in a circle, then passing of rhythmic movement. We then progress to isolations in the body and to sequencing patterns. This sequence reinforces mind-body connections, strengthening, and balance. We also include a portion of time to stretch and end each session with the introduction of dance-making exercises. All sections alternate between taught movements and improvisation. Creative exercises are designed for mastery of dance-making skills along with correct anatomical alignment including vocalization of counts and sounds. Working with each other is encouraged.



Mott Street Senior Center, New York, NY. Photo credit: Kelly Stuart.

The dance-making exercises are informed by the Dance Education Laboratory of the 92nd Street Y (DEL) and Laban elements. We introduce the breakdown of creative movement by moving what (the body), how (the body moves), where (ideas of space from generalized to personal space), and with whom (relationships with others). Remembering to break down the movement in this way, we use a variety of choreographic tools to create dances. For example, one exercise commonly used in our third session is an exploration of dynamics and different ways of moving. We ask the dancers to move through four action words; for example, floating, striking, popping, and swinging, two times and holding at the end. We develop a movement sentence that allows adults to explore different ways of moving together. They see the diverse contribution of everyone in the room.

I was stunned to see the humorous, imaginative movement of my 80-year-old friends! (Lucille, age 79)

A consistent class structure supports class participation, as does music selection. Class music is eclectic, ranging from old favorites in jazz, classical, rhythm and blues, and Broad-

way show tunes, to pop and world beat. Playlists are shared between teachers. A drop box of music is accessible to all company teachers who constantly add new tunes from their own portfolio. Notes prepared by the lead teacher are also shared among the team members after each class.

At the end of class, we close our eyes and silently review what we did. Then we take a moment to be grateful for all we can do, then thank the first person we see for being there today and dancing. We know that this isn't really the end of dancing for the senior, though—many take the activities home with them:

I take the movements that I learned here and do them at home. I encourage my grandchildren to do them with me. (Brenda, age 88)

IMPORTANCE OF REDUCED SOCIAL ISOLATION

MOVEMENT SPEAKS® classes typically serve an average of 20 students per class. Currently the company runs an average of 15 programs annually in four boroughs of New York City. Final presentations showcase what was created in the

term and support the visibility of the practitioners in their communities. The community as well as the seniors benefit from this exposure. DVP often culminates yearlong programs by creating large performances in iconic public spaces, which are open to everyone. In many instances the seniors join with older professional dancers for these performances. This creates the additional opportunity for older artists to serve as mentors to older populations. Many participants remark on this particular value of dancing with others in their community.

The program encourages people from all walks of life to connect with each other. (Nancy, age 75)

Oh my goodness! I liked it all. What surprised me is that I learned things about my neighbors through movement that I never knew. (Henry, age 76)

This is a shared experience ... it's social. Something about the program is instilled in my heart. (Alan, age 82)

There are many other benefits besides connecting with others that participants report from their experiences in DVP.

Seniors report better health physically, mentally, and spiritually. New York City's growing population of low- and moderate-income seniors struggle with high rates of obesity and social isolation (New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene 2010). Through our experience working with seniors in New York City, we have learned that they also have few opportunities to experience mastery of new skills. Among seniors we meet at the start of our programs, we hear them describe themselves as having many limitations, and express doubts about their capacity to learn something new. Gerontological researchers measure seniors' sense of control, and link a growing sense of control to positive mental and physical health outcomes. Recent studies into arts programs for seniors posit a link between an experience of artistic mastery and a sense of control, documenting positive health outcomes for seniors who engaged in professionally led arts programs, far beyond the control group (New York City Department of the Aging 2010).

I have had health issues in the past. I took the class and immediately I had a smile on my face. I was free of pain and my body felt great! (Laura, age 73)



George Bruce Library, New York, NY. Photo credit: Kelly Stuart.



Queensbridge Riis Senior Center, Long Island City, NY. Photo credit: Kelly Stuart.

CONCLUSION

Instituting opportunities such as MOVEMENT SPEAKS®, programs of dance inspiring older adults to participate, supports dance education as a change maker in the lives of individuals and communities. Evaluations from participants have recognized an increased mobility, renewed confidence, and greater happiness through the opportunity of dancing. The voices of our participants sum it all up:

It is a demanding program, but also inviting, cheerful, varied, with marvelous assistants in training and a mix of neighborhood people I would never otherwise meet even though I have lived in the neighborhood for over 60 years. No matter how hard the workout is I always feel so much more invigorated afterwards that I now depend on it to keep mobile and independent. I have made new neighborhood friends who lives just a few blocks away who were totally separate and foreign to my circles before this program and my neighborhood is so much richer, interesting and varied: I love saying hello on Broadway and sharing a meal at our local eateries. (Rebecca Rikleen, age 92)

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