

ARIA EVANS:

Hi, I'm Aria Evans, the artistic director of Political Movement a dance theatre company that makes work from a social and political lens. And this is The 'D' Word. I am back for season three, and we have some incredible guests lined up to talk about this year's theme: science and the mind. How do ideas like curiosity, dance and infancy and shifting trauma through movement influence or interact with the work of dance artists? Well, we're going to dive into those conversations right now. This episode, David Leventhal is calling in. David is the director and founding teacher of the Mark Morris Dance Group's Dance for PD program. Founded in 2001 Dance for PD is a program offering research backed dance classes for people with Parkinson's disease in New York City, and through a network of 300 partners and associates across the world. David has received multiple awards for his work, including the 2021 International Association of Dance Medicine and Science Pioneer Dance Educator Award, the 2016 World Parkinson Congress Award for distinguished contribution to the Parkinson's community, and the 2013 Alan Bonander Humanitarian Award. David, welcome to the show. We're so happy to have you here. To start us off, how did you get into working for Dance for PD?

DAVID LEVENTHAL:

In 2001, the Mark Morris Dance Group opened a new dance center in Brooklyn. Before that time, we operated as an itinerant company, we rented space where we could throughout the city. And finally we had our own home, our own purpose built center for the dancers to rehearse, but also for us to really fulfill Mark Morris's vision of a community dance school and dance center. And in trying to fulfill that vision, really replicating the kind of community school that Mark had grown up in as a young dancer in Seattle. We opened our doors to anybody and everybody, we really wanted that center to be a resource for the community. And one of the people who received that message was a woman named Olie Westheimer. At the time, Olie was running a support group for people living with Parkinson's in Brooklyn, and with her mission to serve this group, but also with her background as a recreational dancer- as a young person she trained in dance- she started thinking about the possibility of

a dance experience for people in her group, as a way of moving beyond Parkinson's, and really changing the experience of their physical bodies, but also their emotional experience of living with Parkinson's. I think she realized that people were spending a lot of time thinking about the condition itself. And she really wanted people to step out of that and do something that was meaningful to them. She realized that all of the things that dancers do in their training, in their rehearsal process, even in their performance, were incredibly useful for people with Parkinson's. The way that dancers think about movement is incredibly useful. And so she walked through our doors and had a meeting with our executive director and proposed this idea of a dance class. And I was one of the teaching artists who was first recruited to pilot this idea through one class in October of 2001, that then started to lead into an ongoing program.

ARIA EVANS: Amazing, and I can imagine how your relationship to the research has evolved and changed from that initial meeting to where the program is at now. What does a Dance for PD class look like?

DAVID LEVENTHAL: Well, the class is remarkably recognizable as a dance class. People come in and they say "that was a dance class."

ARIA EVANS: [Laughs].

DAVID LEVENTHAL: "That reminded me of the classes I took growing up, or the classes I take as a professional", with some really thoughtful and strategic adaptations. So for most of our classes, we start seated to remove any concern about balance, which of course is an issue in Parkinson's, and to create kind of an equal footing for everyone in the room. We realize that in that space, there are people coming in who are newly diagnosed who have very few symptoms, there are people who have been living with Parkinson's for 25 years, or more advanced, and by starting seated, we give everybody an equal start, including the teachers, we're seated as well. And that just brings everybody in together to create a shared community of dancers. And that's really what we try to create

in that very first part of class. Now as we go along, there are opportunities to stand, there are opportunities to travel across the floor. And all of those activities are specially calibrated for folks who may have challenges with balance. But we also always have a seated version, or a supportive standing version for people to participate throughout. And I think our goal really is for anybody at any level to feel included, and to feel that they can contribute to the full experience, regardless of any challenges they might be experiencing that day. And I say that day, because Parkinson's has a lot of variability by the day, by the hour. So somebody who may have challenges today, next week, they might come in and they feel like "today, I can stand. Today I can travel." And we really want to provide a menu of options throughout the class, and throughout the series of classes for people to participate at a level that feels right for them that day.

ARIA EVANS: I'm so curious, because I'm diving into my own version of pedagogy these days. Do the classes evolve over time? Or is it a class that sort of repeats each time that you do it with, like different variables based on who's shown up?

DAVID LEVENTHAL: We really do structure the class based on who's in the room that moment. And because most of our classes are kind of an open registration, we have an open registration policy for the classes. We tend not to accumulate material over the course of many weeks, because we don't want someone coming in on week eight to be completely lost. That said, there are things that we work on week to week that we do develop. And I will say that over time, we see the dancers in that class developing more confidence, more proficiency, more musicality, more fluidity in their movements. So we're definitely seeing that sort of cumulative progress. But in terms of material, we try to make it manageable for somebody coming in for the first time, but also stimulating and engaging for somebody who has been there for five years. And that's a challenge.

ARIA EVANS: Not a small feat! That's pretty impressive. It's interesting, I

had a grandparent who had Parkinson's and I'm just imagining what his experience of a class like this could have been like, had I known that this was something that you could be enrolled in. And I'm curious, you've talked about supporting balance, you've talked about building community, this idea of like, feeling included, building confidence, building proficiently, like that's a big list of benefits for a class like this. Can you talk about other things that you recognize that folks who participate walk away with?

DAVID LEVENTHAL: You know, I sort of divide the benefits into four areas, because I think they're distinct, but they're interrelated. So things that we observe, and also things that have been picked up in more than 48 research studies on this, this kind of program, are our motor skills. So improvements in walking and gait, improvements in balance, improvements in functional mobility, reduction of tremor, an increase in facial expression, which is a big deal for Parkinson's, where sometimes the facial expressions become more masked and less obvious. So a lot of physical and motor benefits. And that's actually the thing that we see most picked up in the research. Then I see an area of cognitive skill building, so people working on things like sequencing or mirroring, movement memory, how do we remember things week to week? Or how do we learn particular phrases, those are things that we work on all the time in dance. I mean dance is, first and foremost, a mental activity, there's a lot of brain work that goes into coordinating movement. And at first, when you're just learning that movement, it's very conscious, that process is very conscious. Third, I think is this sort of emotional and expressive element of Dance. Dance is a physical art form, but it's also an expressive art form. We are speaking with our bodies, we're telling stories with our bodies. And I think the class gives people a chance to express ideas and feelings through their bodies that might otherwise be a little bit more challenging to access outside of the studio. So we use a lot of narrative work, a lot of storytelling in our classes, and that gives people a chance to use their full powers of expression. Because Parkinson's is a kind of, I call it an anti-theatrical condition, it takes away

someone's confidence and ability to use gesture, to use their face, and to use their voice to express so the class helps to give them some of the tools and confidence to do that. And fourth, and by no means least, is social.

ARIA EVANS: [Laughs]. Yeah.

DAVID LEVENTHAL: The social benefits of this class are immense. We see that showing up in the research as well, that sense of social inclusion, reduction of loneliness, and some of the mood changes that occur when you're part of something meaningful in a group, as opposed to being all by yourself. So this, I would say, the social interaction is actually one of the motivators for some of the other benefits. So when you're putting your hand out, it makes a difference, whether you're doing that abstractly, or whether you're reaching to somebody across the studio. And we use a lot of those socially motivated cues to increase movement amplitude to help people initiate movement, because when you're reaching to somebody, or you're looking at somebody, or you're holding hands, that actually helps people cue their movements, prompt their movements, in a way that might be more difficult when we're just giving a kind of mechanical goal. So the social benefits are huge. And of course, the social benefits also influence the expressive part of class and the cognitive part. When we're asking people to do social dances or line dances or circle dances, they have to be very conscious of where they are in space, how they're interacting with others in the room around them. And of course, we hope and trust that those skills also carry with them to the real world where they're walking down the street and having to navigate through a crowd of people or having to have the confidence of knowing where their body is in space, and how they can help sort of manage spatial awareness out in the world.

ARIA EVANS: Thinking back to 2021, when a call went out to a community, and we were like, "use the space", like, how can we support you, where's the reciprocity, and this idea of pairing dance and Parkinson's came together? And you've so eloquently

talked about all the ways that it benefits the disease. And I'm, I'm curious, if you were to talk to somebody off of the street, and if they were to ask, "Well, why dance?", like, why does dance work? What would your answer be to them?

DAVID LEVENTHAL: Well, I may be a little biased here. But I think if you were to go into a lab for three years, and design, the ideal movement modality for someone with Parkinson's, I think you'd come out with something that looks a lot like dance, because dance, it has a unique way of combining the physical, the expressive, cognitive, and the social, and this kind of epicenter of engagement, the way that we have to engage our full selves in the act of dancing. And, of course, do all of that with the support of music, which is an incredibly powerful tool for people who have lost or are losing a sense of internal rhythm, and internal flow. So the combination of those four elements I talked about, with the underpinning of music, is a very powerful set of tools for people with Parkinson's. And I say, very directly, that dance fits Parkinson's like a glove. Like every element of training, and cognition and awareness that dancers go through in their process of going from class to stage and back to class. All of those tools are actually pinpointed to specific Parkinson's symptoms, except that in our world, we think of it as artistic training. So we're not thinking about a condition, we're thinking about how we create and support dancers? And that's how we think of our Parkinson's participants. They are dancers, as soon as they step in the room, they're dancers. So we're applying all of the tools that dancers use in their training to this population, and it works remarkably well.

ARIA EVANS: It's so rewarding to hear you speak so passionately about your work. And I'm curious along the way, if there have been any surprises with working with folks that have Parkinson's?

DAVID LEVENTHAL: Absolutely, I mean, every day is sort of a surprise. But I think one of the things we started to realize after the first few years is how much movement and creative ideas could actually be generated by the participants themselves. So when we started out, we thought that because of what we

thought we knew about Parkinson's, that people would have trouble initiating movement on their own, they would really need a lot of prompts and cues from us. And to some degree that is true. I mean, the external cues related to music, related to imagery are incredibly useful. But over time, I think we've really tried to give more ownership and control of the class material to the participants themselves. So we're there as facilitators, but we integrate a lot more co-creation, a lot more improvisation, a lot more spontaneous generation of material now than we did when we started, and that's simply because the Parkinson's dancers have really asked for that. And they've shown that they want to create their own movements, they're interested in creating their own phrases, their own dances, and exploring their own ideas. So that's been a big surprise. Because if you ask a neurologist or a physical therapist, "can people with Parkinson's initiate things on their own and improvise on their own?", I think they would be a little bit hesitant to say, "Yes". We see it happening all the time. But we do have to provide a structure. It's like, if you give someone a blank canvas, it's a lot more intimidating than if you give them a blank canvas, and some colors to work with. Once you give them some colors, then the magic can happen. They can start to create their own beautiful works of movement art, but it is remarkable what people can create on their own.

ARIA EVANS:

I mean, what a beautiful gift to be able to offer folks a way to engage in their own creative process. That's my favorite thing about my job. So yeah, that's such a beautiful way to give back in other ways than just creating work. I'm curious, and this might be something that is completely unrelated to your research, so let me know, but could having a dance practice help prevent Parkinson's?

DAVID LEVENTHAL:

That's a great question. And I really don't know. I do think that looking at the research, we know, at a basic science level, that exercise and movement seem to be neuroprotective. So we know from some animal models that for animals that were exercising, and were then exposed to a neurotoxin, they had a much less severe reaction to that

than those animals that had not been exercising, and were exposed to the same. But we're not exactly sure we can say that in our species. But it makes sense. I mean, we know that exercise, I'm not talking about dance, per se, but exercise in general, has remarkable effects on brain health. And dance is certainly incorporating those elements of exercise in terms of stamina, and flexibility, and learning new things. But on top of that, you're also adding more complex cognitive skills related to sequencing and mirroring, and coordination. So it seems that it would be a good hypothesis to say that dance may have the effect of slowing down certain progression. We do know from research on dance and Parkinson's, that participating in a dance class over the course of several years, in this case, three years for this particular study, actually slows symptom progression. We don't know that it prevents something like Parkinson's, but we do know from some initial research that it seems to slow progression of symptoms. Which is a pretty major outcome, because pharmaceutical interventions can't slow progression, they can help relieve some of the symptoms, but that progression continues in spite of taking medication. But it seems to be true that dance and probably other forms of exercise too, can slow that progression. I will say that there are definitely outliers. People who are dancers and develop Parkinson's and in my anecdotal experience are doing well, but that's not a scientific survey. And they may be doing well, not because they dance for their whole lives, but because they're able to engage the strategies of dance in managing their Parkinson's symptoms. We don't know how to separate those two, but it's a good question.

ARIA EVANS:

I always find myself throughout my life looking back, being like "how did I get here?" like what brought me to this moment? And did you ever imagine that this was the course that your life was going to take, your research, your creativity?

DAVID LEVENTHAL:

I never imagined it when I first got the dancing bug when I was about eight years old. I really, I love the feeling of dancing, I like to perform, I like to be on stage. And that



really carried me through more advanced training and moving to New York, and auditioning and getting into a company. Once I got into that company, though, I realized how much I really appreciated community teaching work. I found the life of being a touring dancer to be really intense.

ARIA EVANS: Absolutely!

DAVID LEVENTHAL: And quite cloistered. So if you weren't careful, you would just basically see, you know, airport, hotel, and a theater, airport, hotel, theater, kind of in this cycle. And what I loved about teaching, as part of my role as a dancer was to get out in the community to meet people, to share my love of dance and my love of Marc's work with all sorts of people in the community. Young people, kids, older adults, pre professional students, college students, so I love that part. And that's really what got me involved in the Dance for PD program, because when they were looking for people who were interested in teaching, I was already kind of on the list of somebody who did a lot of teaching for the company. But I had no idea that that would take me into a path that would be so engaged with this particular community. I don't have Parkinson's in my family. I knew a little bit about Parkinson's, but not very much. So I feel really blessed that this path opened up to me, because in some ways, and I think I experienced this in the very first class I taught 22 years ago, this is absolutely the best teaching experience I've ever had. So working with those sick people who bravely came into the studio not knowing at all what to expect, and I probably knew even less what to expect. But after that hour, I said that that is what teaching is about. It's this idea of working collaboratively with students, meeting them where they are, understanding what they need, and then helping them arrive at a place in their bodies and in their souls that is transformed from where they started. And if we can do that, as teaching artists, then I think we have met our goals in terms of why we teach in the first place. And what I realized was for this population, it was so much easier to witness that transformation than in other student groups I'd worked with. And I worked with a lot of different populations. But it was

immediately satisfying and immediately reinvigorating in that way that you really actively see the transformation over the course of the hour. And then when people leave the room in a different state than when they entered, you feel like you've really made an impact. And I think that's what we all want as human beings. We all want to make a positive impact on our communities, on our neighbors, on people we've never met, and for them to have a different sense of themselves and their potential as a result of that experience.

ARIA EVANS: Yes. [Laughs]. And it's so nice to be able to find yourself in a place where the eight year old you, who was off to be a dancer, still has that a part of their life in a really significant, impactful, meaningful way. That's what I hope for everyone who crosses paths with dance in their lifetime. I would like to thank you so much for being here and sharing your insight. Where can our listeners find more about you, your research, Dance for PD?

DAVID LEVENTHAL: So we have a brand new website.

ARIA EVANS: Woohoo!

DAVID LEVENTHAL: [danceforpd.org](https://danceforpd.org). And that website really evolved out of the last three years of the pandemic, which allowed us- and there were a lot of challenges- but it really allowed us to explore multiple channels for access. So you can go online and find a local class near you. You can go online and find zoom classes that are offered almost every day of the week, usually for free by our team in New York or teaching artists around the world. You can go on and find on demand videos, if you want to just take a class at three in the morning, you can find some videos to support you doing that. And we also post a lot of the research that has been done on the Dance for PD program, and other similar programs. So that's all posted online. So a lot of resources and information, and you can also contact me through that website and find out more about my work and the work of our entire team. So, [danceforpd.org](https://danceforpd.org).

ARIA EVANS:

That's our show. The 'D' Word is presented by dance: made in canada, a contemporary dance festival featuring Canadian dance artists who possess unique artistic visions and come from all cultural backgrounds. This year, dance: made in canada presents in person programming featuring artists from across Canada in our mainstage, WYSIWYG, dance on film and video, installation and photography exhibition at the Betty Oliphant Theatre in Toronto from August 16th-August 20th. Dance: made in canada's co-festival directors are Janelle Rainville, and Jeff Morris. Yvonne Ng is the artistic director and also co-festival director. The 'D' Word is produced by Grace Elliott with Taylor Young. Our editor and composer is Jamar Powell, our sound engineer is Chris Dupuis at 1990 Studios. And I'm your host, Aria Evans. Thank you to Canadian Heritage, the Canada Council for the Arts, Ontario Arts Council, and Toronto Arts Council for making The 'D' Word possible. Find us wherever you get your podcasts and don't forget to rate and review. Talk to you soon. Bye.