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# USING MODERN DANCE FOR REHABILITATION: TACKLING MS VIA ZOOM?

March 10, 2021

**By Samia Williams**

In 2017, the National MS Society funded a study that focused on documenting how many people in the United States were affected by Multiple Sclerosis, as the last study had not been conducted since 1975. The result provided a staggering number, one that doubled the amount the leading experts had initially estimated: nearly 1 million people in the United States of America were living with MS. Based on the intense prevalence of this disease, and the disastrous impact it has made on families—emotionally, physically, and economically—it is clear that now, more than ever, new ideas are necessary in order to make an impact in the MS landscape and bring greater relief to the affected community.

Over the last four years, researchers have continued to diligently work to further quantify those affected by MS in order to provide better treatment options that potentially alleviate symptoms such as pain, fatigue, and impaired coordination. Many individuals experience cramping, difficulty walking, muscle rigidity, muscle weakness, muscle spasms, as well as a plethora of other visual symptoms, mood symptoms, urinary symptoms, and sensory symptoms. As a result of these studies, coupled with a necessary boost in awareness, many incredible minds have come together to cultivate new methodologies that provide relief to people affected by this chronic disease. Now, individuals have access to medication that assists in slowing the course of MS, as well as access to a plethora of rehabilitation strategies that focus on cognitive functions such as memory and speech, or physical functions such as mobility and accessibility.

For the last five years MS Bright Spots of Hope, a local STL MS non-profit organization, has been offering wellness programs and fitness programs with the intent to *educate, empower, spark creativity, and enhance wellness for the MS community and broader community through engaging programs featuring positive MS role models*—which makes them a fine example of the valuable work being done to better assist the MS community through function rehabilitation. After Michelle Keating, the President of MS Bright Spots of Hope, delved into research supporting the relevancy of dance as a physical experience worthy of implementation, she worked to develop innovative dance programs to tackle the physical symptoms of MS, while bonding a community of individuals mentally as well.

Although the pandemic struck our world unexpectedly, upsetting the natural routine of those who consistently participated in programs offered by the organization, MS Bright Spots of Hope had only rose to the challenge by coming up with quick solutions that would restore comfort and balance and remedy an otherwise confusing situation. Instead of meeting in-person, wellness programs were to be conducted live via Zoom for all participants who were available to attend: including a modern dance program proposed by Jane Horvath—a former Lindenwood Professor of Dance—and conducted by current Modern American Dance Company Board Member and Associate Professor of Dance at Lindenwood University, Tricia Zweier.

As she always wanted to use dance as a form of rehabilitation for non-dancers, Tricia Zweier had worked towards her Master of Science in Kinesiology in graduate school with non-dancers, but up until this partnership with MS Bright Spots of Hope she's never developed a program specifically for people with MS—making this a unique, and highly educative experience. “The performing arts industry has been profoundly impacted by the pandemic,” she says, “it's been phenomenally rewarding to focus on how both concrete dance programming and community engagement can continue in a virtual format.” In December of 2020, Zweier developed an 8-week Dance Movement Program for people with MS every Sunday afternoon from 2:00-3:15, and nearly 40 participants consistently attend class over Zoom to “[harness] both the joy and the power of dance and movement, as well as the energy of music and connection.”

During each Sunday Zoom session, not only does Zweier get participants physically involved in Modern Dance, but she also focuses on engaging with them mentally. To further connect them to the movements they'll be doing, and the dances they'll be partaking in, Zweier introduces them to the history of Modern Dance by also introducing them to a new Modern Dance pioneer each week and encouraging participants to read and watch videos about them and their contributions to the field. Tricia confesses that the group she works with has “such a beautiful openness and curiosity about how to move and how to create movement,” and it's been one of the most rewarding parts of this experience to be able to work alongside them.

This team of qualified dancers have provided a safe, communal platform for these individuals to explore new methods of alleviating effects of MS while connecting these individuals in a wildly personal way regardless of the barriers imposed by the pandemic. One of the consistent highlights of the Zoom meetings each Sunday, Zweier says, has been “the creative breakout rooms [where] participants work together with myself or a MADCO professional dancer. Then, we return back to the larger class and put all of the movements together in one longer phrase. The participants love the breakout rooms!” Often, participants reflect “fondly on their own histories as young people learning to dance in high school and watching dance in the styles and era,” making the overall experience of the Sunday afternoons quite cathartic as they uphold the powerful mission statement of MS Bright Spots of Hope tenfold.

In addition to the participants and the MADCO professional dancers, Zweier is also joined by students of Dance at Lindenwood University to further bolster the potential

effect of this partnership because, “it’s important for students to be involved in community outreach opportunities like this. Fulfilling this in partnership with MADCO, whose dancers have leading collaborations like this for decades, is inspiring. The students are learning so much about how programming like this can positively impact the community.” It’s a recognized fact that it is with community effort, and recognition of their needs, that those who have MS will receive the most help and this program has brought so many people together to connect and educate them for the betterment of their body and mind.

When it comes down to programs designed to make a difference, It’s the intent to make an impact no matter how large it may be; but the impact being made by Tricia Zweier and her team has absolutely been substantial. During this confusing pandemic, MS Bright Spots of Hope, Tricia Zweier, and the Modern American Dance Company have provided physical relief to participants, but the emotional relief prompted by the intoxicating joy during these sessions have also proved to be a necessary medicine.

Thank you to MS Bright Spots of Hope, Tricia Zweier, Modern American Dance Company, and student participants for your hard work and dedication! If you’re interested in participating, click [here](#) for further information.