

WORDS AND PICTURES

Shall we dance?

Kairos Dance Theatre encourages residents in elder-care facilities to share their stories ... and dance

by Pam Taylor

June Bailey, a resident at the Ebenezer Care Center in Minneapolis, taps her finger as the music swells around her. As the tune takes her memories back to her childhood, she smiles broadly and begins to share a story.

"I used to listen to this song in my backyard while my sister and her friends danced the Charleston," Bailey recalled. "They would dance under the apple tree and after a while I would want to go inside before an apple fell on my head."



EMMA FREEMAN

Maria Genné and a resident of the Ebenezer Care Center share a dance.

She laughs as the moment reminds her of what the music means to her—yesterday and today. And those memories, those stories, are all goals of an intergenerational dance program named The Dancing Heart created by the Kairos Dance Theatre.

'Dancing Heart'

"Our program is Minnesota's only intergenerational modern dance com-

pany that focuses on improving flexibility, energy, balance, memory and the socialization of older, frail adults," said Maria Genné, executive and artistic director of the Kairos Dance Theatre. "The Dancing Heart is an organic artistic journey of ways to invite people into the dance circle. Babies, moms, dads, administrators, nursing home [residents]—we will invite them all to dance."

Dancing with children and families since the mid '70s, Genné looked at her own diverse experience of creating communities through dance and was convinced that the circle wasn't quite complete. Genné and her theater colleagues applied for a grant from the Metropolitan Regional Arts Council to develop a dance and storytelling program to reach out to elders at risk. Their wish was granted and on Valentine's Day, 2002, the Dancing Heart program was launched at an adult elder program at Clara Barton Open School in Minneapolis. Since then other grants have been received, including one from the Minnesota Department of Health & Human Services.

Dancing Heart engages frail elders, including those with mid-to-late stage Alzheimer's, in a weekly program that has been proven to positively impact the health of participants. Family members of participants have reported an increase in communication and movement and, for those who had trouble talking, speech, Genné said. Kairos has won two national awards for its work with dance and the aging community.

Circle dance

Kairos, which by definition means open moment, combines dance with storytelling to encourage people to open up and share what's most important in their lives. Once those stories start spilling out, dance typically follows.

"Coming here makes me feel really great. I feel like I belong," said Mattee Kinsey, a member of the Ebenezer dance circle. "It's so warm and welcoming.

When I'm here I'm with friends. I love the spiritual part and I love to keep dancing."

Kairos dance circles, which are currently taking place in seven different locations across the metro area, Lake City and Red Wing, can include a variety of exercises, including warm-ups, stretching, breathing, movement and, of course, storytelling.

"Passing on our legacies proves to us that we are all valuable, no matter what our age," Genné said. "Our brains are wired to share our stories. We are simply trying to create a loving, exciting, stimulating environment where people can talk, share and move." More than 140 elders participate in the Kairos program with help from 50 staff members and volunteers.

"There is no right or wrong in our dance circle," Genné said. "People can tap their toe or simply move their finger and when they're ready, they are welcome to waltz across the floor.

"When I'm older, I still want to be dancing," said Genné, who has performed in theaters across the country. She has served as an arts and education consultant in Twin Cities schools. "I want an opportunity to be a vital elder," Genné continued, "to collaborate with others in my community. If we can help [elders] through our program, then we can help create strong, healthy communities where all of us can grow older—and dance—together."

IFYOUGO:

What: "Dancing in the Park" Touring Troupe with 99-year-old guest choreographer Ida Arbeit

When: Mon, June 15, 7-8 p.m.

Where: Loring Park Community Arts Center, 1382 Willow St., Minneapolis

Cost: Free

FFI: www.kairosdance.org
612-926-5454