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Innovations

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An Active Year for
Senior Issues

**Thinking Beyond 55
in Philadelphia**

**Falls Prevention to
the Forefront**

Quicksilver Dance Troupe Transforms Seniors

BY DONNA CHILDRESS



At the start of a recent performance by Quicksilver, an improv group of dancers aged 60 plus, a measured, calm woman's voice came through the speakers: "I wanted you. And I was looking for you. But I couldn't find you ..."

The dancers began walking slowly as if they were searching, with their hands over their eyes, randomly peering and turning around.

The voice continued. "You are walking. And you don't always realize it, but you're



The dance troupe Quicksilver coaxes artistry—and delight—out of people who never thought of themselves as dancers.

always falling. With each step you fall forward slightly. And then catch yourself from falling, over and over....” And the group walked bouncily front and back, then fell to the floor.

Said the voice, singer Laurie Anderson, “And this is how you can be walking and falling at the same time.” One by one, the dancers rose, then tumbled down again, helped each other up, and pushed each other back down, rolling softly onto the floor. As a violin tune enlivened the mood, some joined hands and twirled. Two others brought out chairs as props. In the end, one dancer sat in a chair, and the others gathered around her as if posing for a family portrait. Then all dropped to the floor and grew back up, arranging themselves again.

Quicksilver created this tribute to balance for The National Council on the Aging’s (NCOA’s) falls prevention summit, Falls Free: Promoting a National Falls Prevention Action Plan, held in December in Washington, DC, and sponsored by the Home Safety Council and The Archstone Foundation.

Yet Quicksilver’s members have been falling and catching themselves and melting to the floor since the group’s founding nine years ago.

Quicksilver is one of the many programs of Arts for the Aging, Inc. (AFTA), which provides artistic outreach services to psychologically and physically impaired seniors in senior day care centers and not-for-profit nursing homes in the metropolitan Washington, DC, area. AFTA’s mission is to work closely with these facilities and involve seniors in creative and stimulating art activities.

Dance troupe members rehearse once a week, and there is no cost to join. They give back by sharing their work, performing monthly at the 51 facilities AFTA serves, and encouraging other seniors, most of whom have dementia or other disabilities, to dance.

Ten dancers now perform with the troupe. Some have formal dance training; others do not. Some are in their 60s and 70s, and many are in their 80s. While the group is open to everyone, all current members are female, except for co-director Anthony Hyatt, who plays the violin for—and sometimes dances with—Quicksilver.

Being Present in the Moment

Quicksilver's dance form, improvisation, focuses on being present in the moment and open to performance, said co-director Nancy Havlik, who founded Quicksilver to give seniors an outlet for creative expression. For some dances, there is a score or a general plan of how the dance will take shape. For example, the score may involve falling and getting up, being still and making shapes, and copying others. Yet "the movement people do within the score is their own choice," she explained.

Other times, the group may use a loose structure, with one person moving and others following, similar to when musicians start with a melody and riff off it. "Improv is making it up as you go along," Havlik said.

This form is well suited to seniors because it "gives people a lot more leeway for their own bodies," she added. And because it is free flowing, remembering intricate steps isn't an issue.

Quicksilver member Jenean McKay, who previously had taken exercise classes with set routines, embraced the unstructured flow of dance. "It's a very different point of view about the body," she said. Dancing with Quicksilver has taught her to focus on how her body works, to value it, and to listen to it.

"A lot of people are not aware of their bodies," said Havlik, and dance improves balance. The increased awareness needed to dance helps people sense where on the ground their feet are, and this awareness makes them physically safer, she said. "They become more fluid in their movement, less stiff."

McKay agreed her balance has improved since she began dancing. "It's part of really paying attention to what's going on."

The up and down movements of improv also cause seniors to feel more comfortable being on the ground. "It's not in our culture for seniors to roll around on the floor," said Havlik, but it's good for them.

Improv also is easily adaptable to people with physical limitations.

One woman who had suffered a stroke, was partially paralyzed, and was in a wheel-



Quicksilver co-director Nancy Havlik (right) engages a senior in dance at the Asian Senior Services Center.

chair danced with her hands. "The expression was very beautiful and still there," Havlik said. Another man walked with a cane, yet swayed gracefully to John Coltrane music. "Those with physical limitations can still have powerful expression," she said.

Janine Tursini, AFTA's program director, also has noticed Quicksilver's ability to coax artistry—and delight—out of people who had never expected to be dancers.

One man joined Quicksilver after having a stroke. His wife, who said he had never danced before, remarked on the joy it brought into his life, said Tursini. Although his abilities had changed, he had learned new ways to communicate. And with something new, his energy level improved. "I think that's where the benefit is," Tursini said.

Benefits for Mind and Body

Dance has a cerebral aspect, too. McKay enjoys the creativity of, say, dancing to a poem and reacting to what she's heard. At the start of rehearsals, dancers do simple exercises in a circle, such as making a sound and motion that the others repeat. Because nobody wants to copy the others, each dancer must concentrate on what movement she will introduce.

Experts say the thinking aspect of dance benefits seniors' health. Research published

in the *New England Journal of Medicine* in June 2003 shows that intellectually stimulating leisure activities, including dancing, can stave off dementia. Of the 11 physical activities studied, only dance was found to reduce dementia risk.

Dance also gives older adults an opportunity to participate in cultural and societal changes. "I feel like dance is paving the way for us," said McKay. In modern dance, male and female roles are interchangeable, with both genders doing similar motions, wearing similar costumes, even picking one another up. McKay believes this breaks down gender-based stereotypes. "That's where we're going, and I want to be part of that," she said.

Through Quicksilver, McKay also reaps the benefits of belonging to a group and learning something new. Although she had never tried dance before, she joined the troupe when she retired and needed something to help her deal with the change. "When you retire, it is a big emotional jump," she said. "I knew this would be good for me emotionally, and it was," she said.

Gretchen Dunn had a similar experience. At a memorial service for her husband in 1996, Dunn met Havlik, who invited her to join Quicksilver. She since has studied several kinds of dance—Japanese improv, contact improv, modern dance—and is now studying

to become a Certified Movement Analyst. "I never was a mover; I never was athletic," she said. But now, "I find it is a big part of my life and is a great discovery," said Dunn.

Dunn also appreciates the bond among Quicksilver members. Performing before an audience is risky, but "there is a high degree of trust among the group," she said. "People are willing to be risk takers. I love the challenge of not knowing what's going to happen."

Dancing stretches the audience's minds and bodies, too.

Tursini repeatedly has watched tense, still audiences stir under Quicksilver's charms. A few years ago, Quicksilver performed before an all-male seniors group. Said Tursini, "I remember watching the men sitting in chairs and seeing Quicksilver go in." The men seemed resistant, saying they weren't interested in modern dance. But soon enough they were holding hands with one another and with Quicksilver—"and having a ball," she said.

The "I can't dance" sentiment is one Quicksilver members hear often from—and seek to change in—audience participants. Early in life, many people decide they have no talent at something, so they shy away from that activity, said Havlik. But through dance, people can express their own ideas or visions. To Havlik, this expression is what vitality is. "It's your life force." ♦

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