

SIX YEARS AGO, INSTRUCTOR NATHAN Daniels started teaching three ballroom dance lessons per week to an older woman he describes yet today as “physically very strong and always immaculately coiffed.” She continues to dance the same schedule in-studio with Nathan when she isn’t traveling, missing only two or three lessons over that entire time.

About four years ago, Nathan began noticing signs of memory loss in his student. As time progressed, Nathan noticed that when Anna (not her real name) had a conversation, she might not finish it, or she would go a completely different direction for no apparent reason. She might not remember important details like where she lived. Anna continued to dance and loved it, though over time Nathan noticed “diminishing returns” from their lessons. While Anna’s family was aware, Nathan was never sure how much Anna was aware of her deteriorating health, as she was never formally diagnosed with Alzheimer’s or other form of dementia.

Nathan had no training in dancing with those living with dementia. He read on the subject and went by trial and error as to what worked and what didn’t. What did he learn?

“The main thing is that you have to meet them where they are and go with that,” said Nathan. “You can’t put whatever your feelings are or whatever your thoughts are onto them. And you have to try to find what’s going to click in.”

He found he needed a “whole different skill set” in teaching, including a different compassion level, different way to talk, and different words to use or not use.

“You have to be able to pivot all the time, changing what you do, to continue progress forward,” Nathan added.

Dancing With Dementia

“Meet Them Where They Are”

BY EMBER REICHGOTT JUNGE



Photo by the Dance Fest Photography Team.

“You don’t use words like ‘remember’ because they don’t, and it makes them feel bad when they can’t. It puts them in that negative mind space, ‘Oh, man, I can’t remember that.’ So you just repeat it. It’s really about compassion and listening and not necessarily wanting a grand result. You want them to have fun and get their money’s worth, which just may be having fun.”

While Anna can sometimes “recapture” information she already knows, there can’t be any new information or input.

“If I try to teach her a new dance, that doesn’t work,” Nathan said. “It’s got to be something she is familiar with, that she can hopefully pull up in

the rolodex in her mind. Sometimes that works and sometimes it doesn’t. She just happens to be very good at following. She does a lot by feel, and not necessarily because her brain is telling her to do this or that.”

Nathan continued, “It also depends on the day. Some days are better than others as far as her retention level. Sometimes I will say something, and a minute and a half later say the same thing, and she acts as though I never said it. Other times she says, ‘You just told me that.’ So both ends of the spectrum happen and you don’t know which one you’re going to get.”

How does that feel as a dance teacher?

“The feeling is mostly good, because you know you are doing something they enjoy and that they are getting fun out of it. And you hope that you don’t do anything that will frustrate them, so it is a little like walking on eggshells. But it’s rewarding because you are hopefully adding positivity to their life.”

And as for her?

“Well, she keeps coming back! And music is huge for her. She loves any kind of music and she constantly wants to let me know that music is telling her what to do. Well, it’s not really telling her to do a heel lead. Sometimes I just go with it, and sometimes the stubborn Nathan comes out and says, ‘No, sorry.’ Sometimes I catch myself trying to be Nathan the teacher, as opposed to Nathan, the compassionate person.”

The Advantage of Dance Community

What if the student with dementia is a male ballroom dancer, who generally is the leader, rather than the follower? Jason (not his real name) has been part of the Argentine Tango community for 20 years, almost as long as Tango Society organizer and instructor Loisa Donnay. Loisa knew him as a “very good, dedicated dancer, a good skier, a single guy, a financial consultant who did well at his job.” Several years ago, Jason was scammed, and had a belligerent run-in with police, both incidents clearly out of character. His friends and family could tell that something wasn’t right with him, so they got in touch with the Tango community, and with Loisa. A lawyer from the community stepped in to help, and another friend suggested that Loisa come to his home—and later to the group home where he was relocated—to visit with him and dance. Loisa started dancing with him during summer of 2020. She still goes to the group home once a

week and often brings other members of the Tango community to dance with him. As often happens, even though Jason has little short-term memory, he remembers Loisa and other friends from his past.

Though Jason had not been dancing for about two years, it all came back to him.

“He is the leader, and somehow, the steps are in his body, in his muscle memory,” explained Loisa. “I don’t know what part of his brain they are in. I’m not an expert at this. He takes a woman into his arms, he hears the music, and he starts to move and walk. It’s such a learned behavior that it works.”

Is he learning new steps from Loisa?

“No, we’re really not doing that. Sometimes about the only thing I can do is correct some of his steps, remind him perhaps why that step didn’t work, and maybe he could do it this way. I don’t pretend to try to teach him anything new. He’s not interested in that. He’s interested in just playing with the music and dancing whenever or whatever he can.”

Loisa says that Jason still recognizes the orchestras and dance music that they play; he knows which song is which, and all of that is still a very big part of his memory.

Loisa continued, “What I’m saying here is that dance is a hobby that

stays with you through thick and thin. When all other abilities may go away you might still be able to dance. And there is the wonderful advantage of the dance community. People who you know as honest will remember you, will surround you, will come to your aid, will have expertise. There is an honesty there that you may not find if you just Googled for an attorney, for example. You are going to your friends and community, who of course have a reputation. Then you have volunteers who are able to talk with you and visit with you and help you out and be part of your life at your tougher moments.”

What is it like to teach Jason under these circumstances?

“He is always there at the door waiting for me to come. It’s quite rewarding and it’s still nice to dance with him, even though it is getting harder and harder to communicate with him (due to aphasia, where he has difficulty speaking the words in his brain). I’m just going over there and brightening his day a little bit. That’s really my scope here. I have no training for this, so I don’t know if I’m helping in a clinical way. All I know is I’m going over there and he’s happy to see me. He’s happy to see anyone I bring along. I do feel I’m improving his quality of life. There’s a benefit I’m giving him.”

Loisa was surprised by an unexpected change.



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“Jason is a very proud man, proud of his accomplishments, his skiing, his travel. That part of his personality has changed. He’s much more humble now than he was. It is really different to deal with him.”

Dancing with Dementia in a Group Setting

Several medical studies have demonstrated that frequent partner dancing can be a powerful tool to strengthen the mind. In one study, the only tested physical activity to offer protection against dementia was frequent dancing. Can dancing be taught to groups of seniors in early stages of Alzheimer’s or other dementia, so as to benefit many more seniors?

Such group classes have proved challenging, but there have been some promising early attempts pre-pandemic. One such effort in Minnesota a few years ago was led by Beyond Ballroom Dance Company and its co-founder, Deanne Michael, in collaboration with the Alzheimer’s Association in Minnesota. Nathan Daniels was a teacher for that class, and he recalled about seven or eight people in attendance, mainly

people living with dementia. They danced together as partners. The challenge in a group class is that it is different every time; different people might attend who are at all different levels of dementia. “You have to feel the tenor of the room,” recalled Nathan. In one case a woman living with dementia attended in her wheelchair, and danced with her husband, her caretaker.

How do you measure success in such a changing group situation?

“What you are trying to do is help them have fun, laugh, and (move) their body. What I think they wanted was to get out of certain surroundings, have a sense of community, touch each other, be able to move and use their brain, and have fun,” said Nathan.

Unfortunately, the pilot class was short-lived, when interest from the local Alzheimer’s Association waned.

On a national level, there have been other efforts to jump start such group classes. In early 2019, an Arthur Murray Dance Studio in New York City partnered with the local Alzheimer’s Association to implement successful in-studio group dance efforts to engage people living with dementia. That same year, Arthur

Murray became a Global Team partner in support of a major fundraising event for the Alzheimer’s Association. While the pandemic slowed things down, there is still strong interest on both sides in re-igniting these opportunities as the pandemic wanes.

Next month, I’ll track in more detail the important medical research around dance and dementia, as well as the history and potential of these powerful national opportunities. For now, I offer my key takeaway: there is strong evidence that partner dance can help prevent or delay Alzheimer’s and dementia. Millions of people could benefit from dance programming designed for people with dementia. But barriers such as funding, staffing, and logistics have prevented sustained programming to make this happen.

We are a dance community. Together, we can change that.

Ember Reichgott Junge is an amateur ballroom dancer and co-founder of the nonprofit Heart of Dance. She seeks inspiring stories from readers for her book-in-progress, Stories of Resilience from the Ballroom Dancer’s Heart. E



Luke Newberg and Genova Morel compete rhythm at Dance Fest 2020. Photo by the Dance Fest Photography Team.