

Dancing With Parkinson's

By Carolyn Jackson

It isn't always pretty, but it *is* always fun. The sound of twenty-five PD people shouting "Olé!" rises above the tango Igor is playing on his keyboard as Dancing with Parkinson's founder, Sarah Robichaud, glides around the room yelling "Wonderful! Fantastic! You guys look *so* beautiful!"

Beauty must be in the eyes of the beholder, I think to myself as I struggle to move my balky left leg in time to the music. Beside me in the circle, Allen chuckles. "*She* looks fantastic," he says. "Me, I'm just staggering around." We laugh. And this, perhaps, is as important as the movement that is going on around the room. No matter how people look and move as they arrive for the Wednesday afternoon class, they leave an hour later with a spring in their steps and big grins on their faces.

Sarah is one of those people whose energy and spirit just lift everyone in her presence. That energy and spirit led her to study with New York's Mark Morris Dance Group after she started working as a personal trainer with CBC Radio's Metro Morning host, Andy Barrie, who had been diagnosed with PD. She didn't know much about the condition, but started researching. A professional dancer and choreographer, she introduced Andy Barrie to ballroom dancing and then took herself off to New York to learn how the Mark Morris dancers develop routines for people with PD.

She says it was the most moving weekend of her life, watching people arrive with walkers and then experiencing the joy and emotions of dance. Back home in Toronto she became a woman with a mission, determined to start free weekly dance sessions for people with PD. "This is my chance to give back," she says. Now neurologists are sitting up and taking notice of the way dancing to music helps their patients. Dr. Tiffany Chow, a neurologist at Baycrest says music is "getting movement going through the back door of the brain." Sarah admits she had no idea the medical world would be so interested, but she is now giving

presentations to the medical community. My own neurologist, Dr, John Adams, told me he was so impressed with her presentation that he asked her to start a class at his Centre for Movement Disorders in Markham. “Unfortunately,” he says with a sigh, “she is just too busy right now.”

Enter Sarah’s new mission. While her class is a first in Canada, she doesn’t intend for it to be the last. In April, she and her friends organized a Dancing with Canadian Celebs fundraiser, which included a hilarious stage show, a silent auction, and raffles for donated prizes. The event raised \$17,000. “I realize now that there is such a need for this,” Sarah says. She has enough people on a wait list to start another class in Toronto and hopes the funds will allow her to promote classes across the country.

Meanwhile, for us “dancers” Wednesdays have become a weekly highlight. Hardly anyone misses a class—even on one Wednesday in a wretched winter blizzard the hall was full. The chance to move to an hour of live music with Sarah and her volunteer helpers is exercise with a difference. Behind his keyboard, Igor Vassine watches Sarah’s every cue and delivers marches, waltzes, cha-chas and tangos with ease and flair, while we try to imitate the grace and beauty of Sarah’s steps. We are all different—Joe freezes, Mary loses her balance, Doris’s arms move to their own rhythm, and I try madly to make my left leg behave—but to a person, we are all smiling, and maybe that’s what makes us beautiful in Sarah’s eyes.

You will be able to see Sarah’s dance class in action in a CBC documentary, tentatively scheduled for the fall. For information: www.sarahrobichaud.com.