



Lucy Bowen
McCauley leads a
Dance for PD class.

To Dance, To Heal

Dance therapy empowers Parkinson's patients in NoVa.

by Christine Stoddard

On a weekday afternoon, Lucy Bowen McCauley, artistic director of Arlington-based Bowen McCauley Dance, tinkers with the sound system as her students—many of them using walkers and canes—make their way into the sunlit dance studio. They've come here because Bowen, a lithe redhead who first opened her studio in 1996, is about to begin her weekly Dance for PD, a free drop-in program for Parkinson's patients.

The music starts as about 10 students take seats in foldable chairs that have been arranged in a circle in the middle of the studio. They work their arms, legs and feet, stretching and lifting as McCauley encourages them throughout the set. For some, though fun, the exercises are also rigorous. After a short break, the group reconvenes at barres facing the massive wall mirror, where they follow McCauley through a series of ballet and '60s moves for the next half-hour.

"We go through this experience together, and it's magical," says Anne Davis, a native Alexandrian now living in Northeast D.C. "Lucy freely gives herself to her students." Davis, 65, has participated in Dance for PD six out of the

seven years Bowen McCauley Dance has offered the class. "I love this class," says Mary Beth Martin, 70, from Falls Church. "I look forward to it ... I've danced all my life, and Lucy has taught me that Parkinson's is just one more ingredient in the mix."

Originally from Indianapolis, McCauley began dancing as a child, earning a scholarship to the Joffrey School in New York City at age 18. She came to the D.C. area in 1988 and founded Bowen McCauley Dance in Arlington eight years later. Since then, she has received accolades from, among other organizations, the American Association of University Women, the Interlochen Center for the Arts, the Arlington Chamber of Commerce and the Arlington County Commission on the Status of Women.

Spurred by her interest in dance therapy, McCauley, who is in her late 50s, trained with the Brooklyn-based Mark Morris Dance Group, the mastermind behind Dance for PD and one of the world's leading dance companies, where she earned her certification in 2008 to teach the program. Though it is a national program, McCauley has made it all her own.

"One of the things that's so special about Dance for PD is that it urges instructors to use their imaginations," she explains. "As dancers, we use our imaginations all the time. I've really enjoyed coming up with my own original exercises for the class."

Students notice and appreciate McCauley's joy and good humor. Learrie Phillip, 65, of Silver Spring by way of Trinidad, says one of the reasons he comes to the class is because "Lucy smiles so much. Her intensity is incredible. It doesn't matter if only two people come to class that day. Her intensity is just as high."

A welcoming demeanor is especially important when working with a group suffering from such an "isolating" disease, McCauley explains. "When patients' mobility and speech start to go, some of them don't want to leave the house. So they get lonely. I'm very sympathetic. This is a place where they don't have to feel alone."

More than a half-million Americans live with Parkinson's, a progressive disorder of the nervous system. Every year, about 5,000 are diagnosed with the disease, whose hallmarks are tremors, stiffness or slowness, and soft or slurred speech.

Parkinson's researchers at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis found in a 2007 study that participating in dance

classes improves patients' balance and mobility, while physicians at Montreal's McGill University are involved in ongoing studies on the benefits of dance therapy. Though more study is needed, dance does lead to improvement.

But research aside, McCauley's students can personally attest to the effectiveness of dance.

Charlotte Boeck, 74, of Falls Church, has been coming to Dance for PD for three-and-a-half years. "My neurologist tells me dancing has made me stronger and calls me the poster child for living well with Parkinson's," Boeck says. "Leg exercises are so important, because legs are often the first thing to go ... The exercises are important, and Lucy is important to us."

McCauley's students are important to her, too. "As someone with a pacemaker, I'm very grateful to doctors and devices," she says. (She has had the device since age 40, when she was diagnosed with a weakened and enlarged heart chamber.) "I don't have Parkinson's," she says, but "I never felt that dance therapy had to be about my disease. Dance for PD allows me to give back to the community through dance."

"You wouldn't believe some of the people who've come and just blossomed," says McCauley. "You don't need a dance background. You don't need to pay. You don't even need to sign up. Just come." ❖

Bowen McCauley Dance currently offers Dance for PD at locations in Arlington, Alexandria and Winchester, as well as Silver Spring and Columbia, Maryland. For more information, go to BMDC.org/Outreach/Dance-for-PD