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DANCING FOR WELLBEING IN HOME AND AGED CARE SETTINGS

Article by Jessica Conneely, Founding Director of Dance4Wellbeing

Creative artists engaging online with elders to support wellbeing

The pandemic lockdowns and a growing ageing population has left many elders isolated, lonely, and at a loss as to how to connect to others.

To overcome this social isolation, I have for over a year now been engaging with elders online via Zoom and dancing with them in their homes or in care.

There has been some resistance to the digital format, but overwhelmingly the benefits have been many and made a difference to people's lives. Resistance to change is always a barrier but when we work together to overcome this, magic can happen. I was even hesitant myself when learning how to adjust my practice to a digital format.

I started small and was also engaged by local council, Lake Macquarie City Council in March 2020 to support an offering for those living at home in an easy to access class – a once a week seated dance session with generational music and creative themes.

This went well, we helped elders with tech tips even with generational support with younger family members involved to set up for some with safety tips and health checks first. We now have many participating in our weekly Dance4wellbeing's MAKE a MOVE class and thoroughly enjoying themselves. As Barb and Maureen so eloquently put it:

"I love my chair dancing! I really look forward to seeing our wonderful Jessica and take a trip down memory lane whilst listening to beautiful music and I don't even need to leave my home."

"This gives me a reason to get up, get dressed, ready to move and connect with friends new and old, I don't know what I would be doing otherwise particularly now we are in a pandemic."

My rules of engagement are short fun sessions with social banter, dance for 45 mins then debrief, laugh, talk about creative ideas then look forward to the next session. I infuse themes of colour, visual stimulation, music inspiration, hobbies, poetry, and we play with creative and structured sequences, short sharp and fun!

We have grown to partner with organisations and aged care to trial group sessions in care that are supported by carers and to reach those who may be on their own via Australian War Widows NSW who offer a Wellbeing program free for members across the state.

Dance brings so many benefits – physically, socially but also mentally via cognitive stimulation, listening to music, rhythms and generally feeling good even if you are dancing in a chair! We chose to stay seated for safety and it is surprising what you can do seated including modified waltz, swing, rock & roll, jazz, and everything in between...

There has been much talk on artists moving online with their work however this is not entertainment... this is creative engagement on another level. I know some artists have struggled with understanding how it works, but with anything new you need to see it in action. Indeed, as part of a creative engagement arts collective, #outsideincollective we have toyed and played with the format finding lively and playful ways to engage – this is



Photo by Shane Williams, Fivespice Creative

the key – NOT as a general Zoom meeting, where you can become distracted or fatigued.

I am now creating ideas on how to engage those living with dementia with less structured sessions. This idea was initially discussed as a concept with Donna Newman-Bluestein, who specialises in Dementia Engagement through dance in New York. I teamed up with Donna via a Create NSW Grant in 2020. I was originally going to travel to the US in March 2020, just as the COVID-19 outbreak began so had to meet via ZOOM instead.

It was clear through our discussions that the global need for these types of engagements with elders is going to grow. We can already see an ever-increasing number of elders living in care or at home either alone or with partners, they need connection to a community, and we need to try harder to build this community and this is where arts can offer a link.

All arts can provide benefits to health and wellbeing, research backs this up, now we need larger organisations to support quality programs from experienced creative engagement artists. Together we can make a difference, what is needed is technology to support this social engagement to make this happen.

To expand the delivery of these programs, Dance4wellbeing has partnered with TAFE government training and multiple Health districts to offer an innovative accredited training in Incorporating Movement in a Health or Care Setting. I present 2-day workshops for health or care professionals online shortly via connected learning and will be available once again post lockdowns face to face.

If I can work it out as an individual artist to create change – imagine the possibilities with major support from partners...

Jessica Conneely began Dance4Wellbeing by offering easy, accessible dance classes for elderly members of her community over Zoom. Her 45-minute seated dance classes incorporate visual aids, cross-generational music and even poetry — and include waltz, swing, jazz, rock & roll and everything in between. She now conducts group classes in aged care facilities, has partnered with Australian War Widows NSW to reach elders living alone, and provides accredited training in Incorporating Movement in a Health or Care Setting. Her latest project involves engaging people living with dementia in unstructured dance sessions. Her work speaks to the importance of sustaining community, connection and engagement in home and aged care settings — and the pivotal role that the arts can play in doing so.