



# Bringing Dance to Boomers

How and why to teach classes  
at senior-oriented locations

by Joseph Carman

**Every seven and a half seconds, a baby boomer turns 60—** which means dance classes for senior citizens can be viewed as a growth industry. By 2020, 35 percent of the U.S. population will be age 50 or older, and that's an age group that gravitates toward movement, dance,

and fitness activities.

The benefits of dance and fitness classes for senior citizens are well documented, including the data cited in a 2014 Saint Louis University research study: improved posture, bone density, and stamina; less stress and tension; and a reduced risk of heart

disease, high blood pressure, osteoporosis, and diabetes. Other benefits can include improved balance, mobility (reducing the chance of falls), and cognitive and memory skills, as well as less depression.

Savvy dance teachers around the country have created programs for



Cynthia Alicea (right) developed the Mindful Moves . . . Dance Inclusion program for mobility-restricted seniors, who typically remain seated during class.

elders. Whether the genre is improvisation, Zumba, chair dance, ballet, or cardio-based movement, senior citizens are making dance a vital part of their lives.

One of the first priorities in teaching seniors is finding a proper space. Bringing a dance class to a recreation center, retirement community, or assisted-living facility is generally easier than asking individuals to find their way to a studio. Here's a look at four approaches that have proven to be both popular and effective.

### Senior Dance Fitness

Hurricane Katrina wiped out most programming for seniors at recreation centers in New Orleans. In 2008, the New Orleans Recreation Department (now the New Orleans Recreation Development Commission) partnered with the New Orleans Ballet Association (NOBA) to rectify the



ABOVE: Renee Meyers (far left) teaches two sequential Senior Dances classes each week at Weinberg Village in Owings Mills, Maryland. TOP LEFT: Movement Speaks offers weekly improvisation-focused classes at senior centers and libraries across New York City, including George Bruce Library in the city's West Harlem neighborhood.

Top left photo by Kelly Stuart; top right photo courtesy Cynthia Alicea; bottom photo by Robert Stokes

problem and revitalize that programming. Aline Neves de Souza, who has a background in physical education, initiated The Senior Dance Fitness Program for senior citizens ages 55 and up. It serves four recreation centers in the city and, says NOBA education coordinator Millette White, has recorded a gross attendance of more than 22,000 students with varied physical and cognitive capacities.

"The class is two hours long," says White, "but it's really two separate hour-long classes. The first hour consists primarily of calisthenics and



Naomi Goldberg Haas (bottom, in green) brings dance classes to 35 senior-oriented institutions in NYC, including Goddard Riverside Community Center (above) and Central Harlem Senior Citizens' Center (top).

stretching, using mats or with participants in chairs. It includes a focus on fall prevention, balance exercises, stretching, and breathing exercises." The optional second hour offers cardio-based dance movement with faster music. All classes are tuition free (thanks to corporate funding) and draw 25 to 75 attendees.

### Dances for a Variable Population

Naomi Goldberg Haas, after receiving an MFA in dance from New

York University in 2002, knew that she wanted to teach senior citizens. In 2009 she initiated two programs for low-income, culturally underserved seniors in the New York City area: Movement Speaks and Dances for Seniors. Since then, under the umbrella of Dances for a Variable Population (her multigenerational dance company and educational nonprofit organization that promotes dance for all, with a focus on seniors), the programs have served thousands of people in 35 senior centers.

"Movement Speaks is a sequential weekly program in which we teach ways to move and ways to think about making dances," Haas says. "Personal expression can be connected to the way you move."

Improvisation lies at the heart of the 10- to 36-week series of 90-minute classes with an average attendance of 30 students. (The first class often runs only 75 minutes.)

Dances for Seniors is a stand-alone event taken to senior centers—part observation, part participation. "It's a way to inspire people with ways to think about movement," says Haas. She has 10 teachers on her payroll to accommodate the community centers her classes serve.

### Mindful Moves

Cynthia Alicea is a retired educator who took dance classes avocationally and wanted to extend her love of dance into her encore career. She danced with Forever Moving Dance



Photos by Kelly Stuart



music, movement, and mental imagery." With her background in andragogy (the method and practice of teaching adult learners), she decided, three years later, to take ballet classes to the senior residents at Weinberg Village retirement community in Owings Mills, Maryland.

But why use so physically demanding a dance vocabulary as ballet, which is normally infused into muscle memory at a young age? Meyer was inspired by the Dance for Lifelong Wellbeing project, conducted by the Royal Academy of Dance in the U.K., which, in its project report,

Company in Tampa, Florida, then launched Mindful Moves LLC in 2010. Her target population: retirement community seniors, including those in skilled nursing facilities and memory care. She and her three instructor employees teach at eight retirement communities in St. Petersburg, Largo, and Seminole, Florida; Alicea herself teaches up to 10 classes each week.

One of her programs, Mindful Moves . . . Dance for the Wise, incorporates the teachings and methodology of dance trailblazers such as Anne Green Gilbert, Anna Halprin, and Liz Lerman. Using visualizations and dance patterns that healthfully engage the nervous system, the 45-minute classes tap into creative movement that feeds body and spirit. Mindful Moves . . . Dance Inclusion uses the same elements but tailors them to mobility-restricted seniors, who usually take class while seated.

Another class, Moving With Agility, runs 30 to 45 minutes and focuses on stretching, strengthening, and balance. An hour-long Dance for PD class (in which Alicea is certified), for those living with Parkinson's disease, uses the methodology devised by Mark Morris Dance Group and the Brooklyn Parkinson Group. And Alicea's International Moves and Zumba Gold dance classes provide additional movement flavors.



But her healing approach doesn't preclude her need to make a living—a fact that teachers might want to consider. "I'm paid by the communities, so I'm considered entertainment," she says. "I had the audacity to do this. I did cold calls, sent out information, met people, handed out flyers. It's a business."

### Ballet Mobile

Renée Meyer launched Ballet Mobile—based on the practicality of bookmobiles—in 2010 with the intention of bringing ballet's educational and healing power directly to the community. Her guiding principles are what she calls "the three Ms:

The Senior Dance Fitness Program's Sassy Seniors (top, with founder Aline Neves de Souza) and Jazzy Seniors (above), from New Orleans, compete at the Senior Olympics.

cited studies stating that ballet can improve reaction time, flexibility, and peripheral vision in seniors and decrease their chances of falling. Plus, Meyer says, "What they get with ballet, in addition to the movements, is the language of French, which adds an extra cognitive piece."

Meyer offers two sequential Seniors Dance classes each week at Weinberg Village. The first class runs an hour and includes relaxation and

Photos by Jeff Strout

guided imagery to classical music, port de bras practiced in chairs, adapted ballet barre exercises done in chairs or standing, and gentle stretching. It can act as a warm-up for the optional second class, which includes more barre exercises (using chairs for support), such as pliés, tendus, relevés, dégagés, and fondus; freestanding ballet steps, such as balancés; a 45- to 90-second dance sequence in

Movement Speaks class, Haas takes an introductory Dances for Seniors class into a residence to let management and residents see that it's both fun and a way to learn about dance as a means to increase mobility, improve balance, and provide creativity and social connection. "The first program is essential, so they have an idea [of what it is]," she says. "Not all places we go to continue with

and comfortable physical environment. Obviously, an uncluttered area is a priority. "We prefer a room that is designated for activity, not a lunchroom," says Haas. "We have run some programs [in lunchrooms], but it gets noisy."

It's essential to prepare when chairs, mats, cushions, or barres are needed. In her Dance Inclusion classes, Alicea always has students sit in a circle rather than in rows, so they can see the teacher and be seen. If music is desired, find out if the centers have sound systems or if a portable system is needed. Using appropriate music for class is imperative. Senior students may prefer Sinatra and *Swan Lake* to a heavy metal band like Slayer—although you never know. Get acquainted with the participants so that you *do* know.

Although centers and retirement homes usually carry liability insurance, anyone who offers classes in these settings should have insurance to cover any potential damages.

In terms of funding, local and federal grants are available for programs for seniors, as are donations from corporations and individual donors, so carving out time for grant writing is important. "We are entirely supported through grants," says Haas. "We have to pay teachers, for publicity and marketing, and for rental space. We have people who consult with us for grant writing."



which the participants engage as a corps de ballet; and a final relaxation.

The Seniors Dance classes usually have 30 to 35 participants, including five to seven men in the first hour. The average age is 86. Meyer's husband, who holds a black belt in tae kwon do, roams the practice hall as a spotter.

### Logistics of teaching seniors

To tailor classes efficiently for an older demographic, it's important to do a little research. "The first step is getting connected to the community you are trying to reach," says White. "Get to know where the need is and what venues can host these types of classes. Find out what types of programming are offered for seniors so that you're not duplicating services."

Before she implements a

While her Mindful Moves program focuses on the mobility-restricted, Cynthia Alicea (right) also offers Zumba Gold classes to more mobile seniors.

Movement Speaks."

In New York City, where Haas' program is based, neighborhoods are culturally distinct. "We try to be sensitive to the community we're working with," Haas says. "We prefer teachers who come from different backgrounds. We have a Chinese-speaking teacher who always works with the classes in Chinatown. You have to have your ears and eyes open to what inspires people, because the whole idea is that you want people to try movement."

Awareness of a senior community's needs includes providing a safe

### The right approach

Having a lesson plan is great, but being willing to adapt is more important. "Whoever is sitting in front of me determines what direction to take that lesson plan," says Alicea, who was a presenter at 2016's "The Creative Age: Global Perspectives on Creativity and Aging" conference in Washington, DC, last September. "Sometimes there are days in my classes [for the memory care unit students] when I have to drop my plans and go with, 'Let's just move to music.' The class has to be modifiable and flexible."

Conducting classes for elders is

Photo courtesy Cynthia Alicea

primarily about empowerment, not technique. For example, participants who wear orthopedic shoes may have difficulty with balancing, so modifications are paramount.

While her classes may include ballet, jazz, or social dance vocabulary, says Haas, "what ties it all together is creative and improvisational movement. [The participants] derive pleasure from the movement [of] their own bodies. When you bring in the idea of choreography and remembering the steps—that's powerful for the older brain. They feel that mastery of, 'I know I did this and I can do it again,' or 'This is where I started something and this is what I made.' I'm interested in letting people have that 'Aha!' moment."

"If you are a dance teacher, you've most likely been entrenched in a technical focus," says Alicea. "You've got to let that go." For example, a teacher may want seated seniors to support their backs with their core and spinal muscles. "I try to focus on obtaining that," she says, "but I can't ask someone who doesn't have the strength to accom-



plish that. You have to let that go and focus on what moves they can accomplish today."

### The comfort quotient

Consistency in the class structure helps prevent seniors from becoming disoriented. "It takes courage for them to get there," Meyer explains, so making them feel at ease is important. She says that starting and ending class with relaxation techniques helps loosen them up. Meyer has also found that some participants like to carry crib sheets, especially when referencing the ballet vocabulary or dance sequences.

Participants in the second of two weekly Seniors Dance classes at Weinberg Village engage in free-standing ballet steps and a 45- to 90-second dance sequence.


And classes need protocols. Speaking with maternal warmth, Meyer says, "Don't let them get late and talkative."

### Words from the wise

"Communication is key when you start a program," says White. "That builds trust with participants." Collect contact information, including email addresses (if they have them) and phone numbers, in order to notify them of emergencies or class changes. "For seniors, flyers are important since they don't all get online, and they can share flyers with their friends," White says.

"Just because people have movement limitations doesn't mean they don't have lots of ways they can move," says Haas. "Be open to thinking about the possibilities of movement and instilling that in older persons."

Alicea reminds teachers that senior students aren't going to dance the way most instructors are accustomed to envisioning their students—they have their own limitations and their own expressivity. "You have to enjoy movement for movement's sake," she says.

Teaching seniors requires the right venue and the right fit—and the recognition that dance is a great gift to give those who crave and need it. As Meyer says, "They discover their own grace." 

## Resources

### Read

- *Brain-Compatible Dance Education* by Anne Green Gilbert
- *The Creative Age* by Gene D. Cohen
- *Creative Dance for All Ages, Second Edition*, by Anne Green Gilbert
- *Dance as a Healing Art: Returning to Health With Movement and Imagery* by Anna Halprin
- *Dance for Lifelong Wellbeing: Project Report 2013*, edited by Dr. Victoria Watts: [rad.org.uk/more/dance-for-lifelong-wellbeing/report](http://rad.org.uk/more/dance-for-lifelong-wellbeing/report)
- *Move with Balance* by Karen Peterson
- *The Song of the Body: Dance for Lifelong Wellbeing*, edited by Dr. Anne Hogan
- *Teaching Dance to Senior Adults* by Liz Lerman

### Watch

- American Society on Aging web seminars: [asaging.org/web-seminars](http://asaging.org/web-seminars)
- *Braindance* (DVD), Anne Green Gilbert

### Certification and info

- Dance for PD: [danceforparkinsons.org](http://danceforparkinsons.org)
- National Dance Education Organization: [ndeo.org](http://ndeo.org)
- Zumba Gold certification: [zumba.com](http://zumba.com)