

**Jessica Warchal-King** is on a mission: to spread the word that dance can be transformative for everyone.

A graduate of Exeter High School and a professional dancer who lives in Exeter Township with her husband, Justin, and 20-month-old son, Tristan, she has been helping people in the Berks County area to find wellness through creative dance.

Her class, Dance for Wellness, held each Monday at 11 a.m. at the Reading Health Rehabilitation Hospital in Spring Township, helps people with Parkinson's disease and other physical issues to improve their mobility through modern and other types of creative dance.

And at The Restorative Center in Exeter Township, she teaches Contemporary Dance for Everybody every other Tuesday. That class fosters dance creativity in a nonjudgmental atmosphere and helps dancers and nondancers find their own natural movement pathways.

"Dance is a holistic movement form that involves the mind, body and spirit," **Warchal-King** said, sitting on the floor of the art gallery in Alvernia University's Francis Hall after meeting with students there. "It creates joy and community.

"I keep pushing for the physical practice of dance because the more we understand our body, the better we understand ourselves, and have the capacity to empathize with each other. Dance can be a force for nonviolent, positive social change. Because the body is so individual, having an intimate interpersonal connection is an important part of social justice."

Dancing all her life

**Warchal-King** has been dancing nearly all her life, beginning with classes and performances with Berks Ballet Theater. She earned her bachelor's degree at Muhlenberg College, majoring in dance and anthropology, while spending summers performing at Busch Gardens in Virginia.

In her classes with an anthropology professor who specialized in food in the Yucatan, she became fascinated with "how you could find out so much about the lifestyle of people from what they cooked and ate. And you can tell so much from the bones; whether a woman had a baby, or if they did manual labor. They hold the stories. You build those stories from the body."

She also became interested in Robesonia native Amy Cuddy's research on how physicality can influence your emotions, she said.

(Cuddy, a Harvard Business School social psychologist, gave a TED talk in 2012 on "power posing.")

After living and teaching in Virginia and performing regionally, **Warchal-King** moved to Philadelphia, where she earned an Master of Fine Arts degree in dance at Temple. She danced for a time with the Nora Gibson Contemporary Ballet, and with Kun-Yang Lin Dance, whose company she joined in 2010, remaining until 2017. She is still on the staff as curator of the KYL/D InHale Performance Series.

Dance for PD

As someone who thinks deeply and spiritually about dance, it was natural for **Warchal-King** to find her way to Dance for PD, launched in 2001 by the Brooklyn Parkinson Group and the Mark Morris Dance Group.

"I was trained by the Mark Morris group, and began teaching (from 2011 to 2014) through Dance for PD with KYL/D," she said. "It was such an incredible experience for the people and their caregivers, because it creates joy and community and laughter.

"We all have a body, and the body can move, and that's such a gift. Even if you only have parts of your body that can move; even the eyes can dance."

After Tristan was born, **Warchal-King** approached Tower Health to see if she could teach a Dance for PD class at the rehab hospital. In the spring and summer of 2017, she ran some pilot classes, and now the class is open to the public for \$5 per class.

"What I like about Mark Morris' philosophy is that it's a dance class with artistic intention, not therapy," she said. "We do somatic practices from modern dance, jazz, isolations, a little Bob Fosse and a lot of creative movement storytelling. It's fun, but there are real psychological and physiological benefits."

Doug Nemeth, 62, of Blandon, who has had Parkinson's for 13 years and attends the class regularly, said: "It's a real good thing for getting everything stretched out, and she's so much fun. She has you going into places I never thought I'd go to. You have to leave your inhibitions at the door."

Calm stress, get loose

Nemeth, who had never danced, said the class has helped him calm his stress and get loose, because **Warchal-King** has the students use their imaginations, becoming "all kinds of animals," incorporating moves "without you knowing it."

"You use your artistry to do this, and I never thought I had any," he said. "Now I even know the names of some ballet moves, so I impress my granddaughter."

Judy Bush, another student who doesn't have Parkinson's but has other issues, said she preferred **Warchal-King's** art-based class to those that simply do repetitions.

"With this, we do it to music, and you're stretching further than you realize, and you don't realize you're standing as long as you are," Bush said.

She said so far the class has done ballet, tap, tango, Rockette-style kicks, the waltz and the lindy.

"She makes it really fun, and there's no judgment at all," Bush said. "Afterwards, it's almost like you had a massage or have been to a yoga class, that energized feeling."

**Warchal-King** also teaches a similar class for Alvernia University's Seniors College, a 55-plus continuing education program, and in December became artist-in-residence for Alvernia's Fine Arts Department, given the mission to explore the possibilities for concert dance and for collaborations with other artists on campus. She has taught at Widener University since 2012.

Her own company, JCWK Dance Lab, works on various projects combining education, physical dance practice and performance, to create "joy, connection and wellness through kinesthetic storytelling."

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