



STEVE RUARK

The hour long class debuted in 2014 when Weinberg Village activities director Gayle Newman persuaded Renée Meyer of Ballet Mobile to see if ballet training would benefit seniors long-term.

On Their Toes

A ballet class helps Weinberg Village residents improve physically, cognitively and emotionally.

By Caryn R. Sagal

With “Edelweiss” and other dulcet tunes playing in the background, approximately 25 women and men rally to point, pose, *plié*, *relevé* and sway to choreographed routines.

But this troupe isn’t a professional ballet company. The dancers reside at the Weinberg Village senior living community in Owings Mills. Their stage is the multi-purpose room in the complex’s Building 5.

Clad in comfortable outfits and sneakers, some of the dancers are “in perfect health,” while others contend with physical ailments such as arthritis and memory loss.

Participants leave their cares behind each Tuesday for six weeks during their beloved “Memory through Movement”

class taught by Renée Meyer, an adult learning specialist and master ballet instructor. Meyer also directs Ballet Mobile, a traveling educational and charitable performing arts company that caters to senior audiences.

The hourlong class debuted in 2014 following a Ballet Mobile performance at Weinberg Village. Meyer cited a British study reporting that seniors who participate in ballet classes improve their well-being, safety, memory and general health.

Intrigued, Weinberg Village activities director Gayle Newman persuaded Meyer to introduce weekly classes to determine whether ballet training would benefit seniors long-term.

After securing initial funding through a

grant, Newman advertised the class as a way “to build cognitive improvement through exercise.”

“It didn’t say ‘ballet,’ and if it had, I wouldn’t have gone because at 300 pounds I look more like a linebacker than a ballet dancer,” says village resident Lester Poris, 81. “I’m so glad I came because it was a lot of fun, my balance is better and I have a new appreciation for ballet.”

Tailoring the class to seniors’ needs, Meyer quickly learned every student’s name and built a rapport with them, instilling trust and comfort.

“Our goal is to bring joy to these seniors, let them know they matter and have them leave feeling more confident,” Meyer says.

Mission accomplished, says resident Shirley Rollins. “Renée makes us feel important and she teaches with respect, skills and knowledge so we can understand,” says Rollins, 81.

Jeannette Feldman, 99, concurs. “The teacher is outstanding and gives me a sense of balance so I can be sure of myself. It’s a wonderful feeling,” she says.

The online magazine *Dance Studio Life* has recognized the class as a model with “movement, music and mental imagery.”

The class usually begins seated with warm-up movements to “relax the wrists and focus on the gentleness of the fingers.” Participants hold silk flowers — handmade by Meyer — and move their arms into various ballet and hula positions to “wake up the neurons in the hands.”

Next, they rotate, bend and straighten their legs before a five-minute period of meditation. “The meditation helps me accept losses,” Feldman says. “My husband of almost 74 years passed away two years ago. I’m not over it, but I’m more accepting.”

Building back their energy, the dancers then sit or stand while moving their arms and legs and gently turning their heads. A recap of all the moves follows with some new ones thrown in, such as crossing the arms and legs.

“When I started two years ago, I couldn’t move my legs due to charley horses,” says Rose Wendel, 93. “Now, I can cross my legs and I have much more flexibility.”

Everyone gives themselves a hug before a final meditation to feel as if they are “floating with all cares aside.”

Comforted and reassured when the class concludes, the dancers can keep the flowers as mementos. At the end of the six weeks, they also will receive CDs of the music and report cards.

In addition, they will complete surveys for qualitative research and analysis by Meyer and Newman. Past feedback has shown “improved reaction time, posture, spatial orientation, flexibility, peripheral vision, balance, confidence, stamina, coordination, memory, well-being and reduced anxiety.”

“This class has helped so much. I’m not falling now and I’m walking outside daily.”

— Joanne Levy, 85

Joanne Levy, 85, says she has “been in the hospital many times after falling, and this class has helped so much. I’m not falling now and I’m walking outside daily.”

One of the “youngsters” of the class, 72-year-old Dora Ordman, was diagnosed with Parkinson’s in 2008. After taking the class, she says she no longer shakes and notes, “Everything is easier now.”

Diane Seidel is a newcomer to the class, but says she plans to stick around. “I have COPD and my whole body woke up during this class,” says Seidel, 80. “It feels great and I’ll definitely come back.”

Newman, who has been with Weinberg Village for 12 years, watches the class lovingly as a proud parent to the dancers. She says her challenge is to keep the class operational for multiple sessions a year and relies on donations.

“I want [participants] to learn how to use their mind and body,” Newman says. “They don’t have to be afraid of aging when they see what they can achieve.” 

For information about the class, call 410-753-3952.

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