



WITNESS

an online magazine

Wheels & Heels

Dance As Therapy

Photographs & Text
by
Richard Falco



Barbara Verlezza initiates breathing exercises and warm-up stretches for the class participants.

Wheels and Heels began in association with Dance in Education Fund (DEF) in 2003. The Fund was established by the dance educator and pioneer, Steffi Nossen. DEF began dance education outreach programs to people with special needs in the early 1980s. That effort continues today.



Sabatino Verlezza explains his choreography to dancers in the studios at the Music Conservatory.

Wheels and Heels is the outgrowth of the relationship between the Steffi Nossen School of Dance staff members and Dancing Wheels, a professional dance company of sit-down (wheelchair) and stand-up dancers based in Cleveland, Ohio. The program consists of one full week of classes every June at the Music Conservatory in White Plains, New York. This is followed by classes that run once a week throughout the rest of the year. They also have an offsite outreach program in the community. The principal instructors are Barbara and Sabatino Verlezza from Dancing Wheels and Nancy Lushington from the Steffi Nossen School.



Barbara Verlezza shares a laugh while stretching with one of the dancers.

The program begins each day with warm-up exercises and stretching. For the instructors, the first goal is for participants to experience the joy of moving to music while developing increased strength and flexibility. The second is to help them develop social skills, self-confidence, and focus.

Over the course of the first few days, the bonds that weave the dancers and teachers together quickly begin to form. There is a wonderful sense of warmth and community. The energy and enthusiasm generated by the instructors becomes infectious for everyone.

The Verlezzas consider themselves educators as well as artists. “The only equity that any of us can hope for in this life is to be given the opportunity to try,” says Barbara Verlezza. “Too often misperceptions about ability have stymied dancers with disabilities. We try to give them the opportunity to chase their dreams.”



Dancers gather together in the morning before class begins. They are often accompanied by their families.



Dancers Marcie Ryan and Frank Hull enjoy a free-form glide across the floor.



Sabatino Verlezza works with dancers to help them focus on form and strength.

Throughout the program, each participant is encouraged to move to his or her maximum capacity. Dancers with disabilities work side-by-side with stand-up dancers. These inclusive dance classes are beneficial for the whole community and are helping to change the perceptions people have about disabilities. The dancers benefit by developing independence and improving their quality of life.

“There is a desire to dance in all of us,” says Sabatino Verlezza. “Sometimes it takes a simple invitation or permission to go to that expressive place we call dance.” He feels that it is very important to bring the arts to the community. “It enables us to celebrate our own bodies.”

Sabatino and Barbara Verlezza have been working with Steffi Nossen Dance for over fifteen years. Barbara and Sabatino had been the principal dancers in the May O’Donnell Dance Company in New York City for many years before forming their own company. In 1992, Verlezza Dance was invited to present Sabatino’s choreography at a dance festi-



Dancers Jennifer (Allie) Friedrich (left) and Iffat Mahmud-Khan (right) stretch and practice during a morning workout.



Sabatino Verlezza jokes with the dancers during a break. In addition to building self-esteem, the experience is filled with fun and laughter.



Sabatino uses movement to express an emotion.

val at The Theater of the Riverside Church in New York City. The festival was hosting companies from around the country. The event served to alter the Verlezza's personal definition of dance forever. "In a work that was representing Cleveland, Ohio, one dancer performed using a wheelchair for mobility while her partner, a stand-up dancer, used traditional leg movements and dance vocabulary," says Barbara Verlezza. "The combination of sit-down and stand-up dancers was a beautifully balanced, technically challenging, and qualitatively rich partnership that was truly awe-inspiring. The performance inspired a mutual respect as well as a keen interest to collaborate and explore the exciting possibilities of integrated dance."

Two years later, Sabatino was offered a directorship from Dancing Wheels (formerly known as Cleveland Ballet Dancing Wheels). His job was to build an entirely new series of outreach programs, classes, and main stage repertoire for 8-15 professional dancers with and without disabilities. That same year, the Verlezzas relocated to Cleveland and for nine years served in director roles: Sabatino as Artistic Director/Choreographer, principal dancer, and senior faculty member; Barbara as Associate Artistic/Education Director, principal dancer, senior faculty, and Administrative Director.

From 1994-2003, the company toured and performed regularly. During that nine-year tenure, the organization increased to include a school curriculum of ongoing community dance classes, collaborative workshops with community arts and disability organizations, and annual dance intensive workshops and theater arts camps for people of all ages and abilities.

In 2003, Barbara and Sabatino went on to become the directors of the Creative Movement/Dance programs at the Cleveland Clinic Children's Hospital for Rehabilitation and the Euclid Adult Training Center for senior adults with developmental, physical, and sensory disabilities. Both of them are deeply committed to bringing dance to underserved communities. "The disabled community is often invisible," says Barbara. "We all want to be visible. We want to have our lives witnessed and acknowledged. Dance gives an individual that opportunity."

Nancy Lushington met Barbara and Sabatino when they all danced together with the May O'Donnell Dance Company. Nancy then went on to become a faculty member with the Steffi Nossen School of Dance. For more than eighteen years she has served as the company's Artistic



Dancers work on form and focus during a morning workout.



Frank Hull and Iffat Mahmud-Khan share a moment.

Director and Choreographer. She also teaches at the Marymount-Manhattan College, Montclair State University, and has taught master classes internationally. However, she continued to work periodically with Barbara and Sabatino on different projects throughout the ensuing years. When the DEF board members asked Barbara and Sabatino to establish an annual summer program at Steffi Nossen, the collaboration was a natural match. “Dance is language,” says Lushington, “and I love the opportunity to share it.”



Barbara Verlezza discusses the choreography of the dance that will be done for the school recital.

After the daily warm-ups, a great deal of time is spent discussing the music and movements the dancers will need to learn. This is no different than the approach taken by any other dance company. Once the concepts for the choreography are understood, the dancers go about learning the piece. Everyone attentively listens during these discussions and each person often contributes his or her own ideas.



Nancy Lushington (left) works with dancers on a choreographed piece the group is learning.

The program's philosophy is that every dancer has something personal to contribute and something new to learn from other dancers. As the week continues to unfold, the dancers move between fun and exercise to serious workouts and the development of a choreographed piece. The group will grow together as an ensemble. They quickly become a family. The beauty of the experience is shared by everyone involved. "I think," says Nancy Lushington, "the disabled dancers are enormously moved by the improvisational parts of the workshop where they are touched physically and can touch in return, where they are asked to support others and to use their bodies to express themselves."

To say that the program has become a family affair would be putting it mildly. Both disabled and stand-up dancers bring their families. For the Verlezzas, their son and daughter are active participants. Nancy Lushington's children and niece are also involved. "I love having my own children participate in the workshops and the interaction between all the dancers," states Lushington. "My kids have grown up participating in these programs and their response to disabilities is colored by it. They have no fear or discomfort. They see it as natural that everyone should dance."

Nineteen year old, Sabatino, Jr., grew up watching his parents work with dancers with and without disabilities. "I truly admire and respect my parents for the work that they do because they will go to the farthest reaches to help anyone experience the joy of movement," says Sabatino, Jr.

Nancy Lushington's niece, Hannah Lushington (far right/stand-up dancer), works with her fellow dancers.



Sabatino Verlezza, Jr. (right/white shirt) instructs other dancers about the choreography for one of the movements the group is practicing.



Sabatino Verlezza, Jr. works with dancers Kirsten Gershoni (front right), Tracy Miller (front left), Frank Hull (center), and Isabelle Russo (rear left).





The dance floor becomes a whirlwind of energy and movement.



According to Barbara Verlezza, “it is the responsibility of the creative dance educator to find the essence of the movement and help the individual to discover that essence.” Barbara feels that one of the main goals for Wheels and Heels is to “reduce the barriers confronting people with disabilities who wish to participate in the arts and to encourage the non-disabled community to redefine the meaning of ability.” She says, “we have witnessed a marked increase in self-esteem and confidence from dancers who were uncertain and reticent in the beginning.”



The group does not shy away from the use of drama or theatrics in their choreography.

“Barbara and I feel that everyone has a dance inside of them. Everyone uses gesture or movement to express an idea, a thought, an emotion. Whether on a social level or an artful level, movement can convey something that sometimes words cannot. We are housed in our bodies and we use this house or temple as an instrument of expression. Whether one has training or not, humans find that it is a very powerful and empowering thing to do – to express without words,” says Sabatino, Sr.. “Everyone, no matter what their ability or lack of ability, has the right to express. As long as there is life, there is movement. And where there is movement there is a story. And then, we might get a response back from a viewer or an audience ... a witness. And suddenly, we feel that we are not alone. That one’s existence does matter.”

Sabatino feels that some people have more challenges than others, but all have a desire to speak in a fashion that is more poetic, more artful, more personal, and sometimes in a way that is more transcending than common communication.





One dancer noted that they had learned to recognize each other's abilities and not just their disabilities. If art reveals the human spirit, how does it heal and nourish? In her book, *The Art Therapy Sourcebook*, Cathy Malchiodi states, "Art therapy is based on the idea that the creative process of art making is healing and life enhancing and that it is a potent form of communication. It utilizes the creative process, which exists within every individual, to promote growth, self-expression, emotional reparation, conflict resolution, and transformation. It is a way to make sense of that which is painful, to create personal meaning, to enhance wellness, and to become whole." Everyone involved with Wheels and Heels walks away a better person.



Contributions to help these organizations continue their work can be sent to:

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Verlezza Dance
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