



Master teacher Renée Meyer uses her 30-plus years of experience to guide her senior ballet students.

# BENEFITS OF BALLET

Residents of Weinberg Village show off their classical moves

By Melissa Apter | Photos by Melissa Gerr

**AS THE STRAINS** of “One Hand, One Heart” from the musical “West Side Story” play over the sound system, the senior ballerinas and ballerinos of Weinberg Village cease talking and take their seats for their warm-up meditation.

Master teacher Renée Meyer, assisted by her husband Robert Stokes, speaks calmly through the exercise and invites those who are able to stand up. As the music swells, she leads them through each ballet position, first with legs only and then adding arms. The dancers move their

arms and legs from third position to second position and then they float their arms “like a snowflake” down to first position.

Participants from all five buildings gather once a week for five weeks, beginning in mid-January, in the Great Room of Weinberg Village V to attend ballet class. Most dance students are in their 70s and 80s. One woman is in her early 90s. Some have mobility issues and run through the exercises from a seated position, swaying their arms back and forth and lifting their feet in time with the music.



Students have the use of chairs to steady themselves if needed during each lesson.

Below: Even those seniors with mobility issues do their best third position arms.



Shirley Rollins, a sprightly blonde resident, joins Stokes on a raised stage to demonstrate the dance patterns Meyer calls out over the microphone as she walks through the room. She pauses to place a hand on a shoulder here, to offer a compliment there. She knows each student by name and has endeavored to create a warm, serene atmosphere.

Ballet Mobile, Inc. was founded by Meyer in 2010. The charitable and educational performing organization bills itself as the “Bookmobile of Dance” with the tagline, “We make

house calls, not curtain calls.”

One of those house calls occurred last year when nearly 150 residents attended the Ballet Mobile troupe’s performance of “The Nutcracker.” All of the troupe’s performances are interactive, including those that cater to a senior audience.

In speaking with Gayle Newman, Weinberg Village program coordinator, Meyer mentioned a study conducted by the Royal Academy of Dance in the United Kingdom that showed “positive mental, physical and holistic benefits to be derived from

dance” for older adults who might not otherwise be exposed to dance classes.

Looking to replicate those results, Ballet for Wellness launched at Weinberg Village in fall 2014. The pilot program lasted 10 weeks, with one class per week. It was a hit among residents.

Robert Fischer, an outgoing gentleman, attends the class, he says, because his wife of nearly 60 years, Barbara Lee Fischer, told him to come.

“Last year for our anniversary she asked me for diamonds, so I bought her a pack of cards,” he says in true comic style. But, “in all seriousness, people [think of] Weinberg as a place for people to go to die. They don’t realize that we have the most active seniors anywhere in the country. Every day there’s something going on.”

Much of that he attributes to Newman, who he describes as “always having a smile.”

Newman was worried that residents would not want to sign up for ballet, so initially she advertised the class as an exercise program for improved memory and movement. That’s what caught Lester “Les” Poris’ attention. He is tall and broad shouldered, more football player than ballet dancer.

“They talked about it as an exercise class; they didn’t tell me it was ballet,” he says with a chuckle. “When my kids asked, ‘What are you doing?’ and I said ballet, I had to pick them off the floor they were laughing so hard.”

He has stuck with it and says it’s great for exercise, balance and “helping the old gray matter.” Now he finds himself at the gym working out on the treadmill for a half-hour at a time, something he didn’t do regularly before the class.

Following the basic ballet class, Poris joins a smaller group, selected by Meyer, in a mirrored room across the hall from the great room. These are the advanced students.

Meyer treats the dancers in Basic Ballet for Wellness II just as she

would a regular ballet class. There is no talking during instruction and no excuses. They run through more complicated routines and floor exercises in pairs. The results over such a limited period of time are astounding.

In her class notebook, Meyer takes detailed notes on each student. She has observed her students standing up straighter, demonstrating security in movement, showing improved balance and mobility. From a mental standpoint, her students have shown a higher tolerance for ambiguity, an increased willingness to work through frustration and a comprehension of the French and English dance terminology sprinkled throughout each lesson.

“I raise the bar and they’re right there with me,” says Meyer.

“The class is absolutely superb, relaxing and makes you feel wonderful,” says Fraydel Kravitz, a Weinberg Village I resident, as the class concludes.

Another side effect Stokes notices is social.

“They get out of their doors and meet their neighbors,” he says.

“We socialized him!” Meyer says with a laugh, referring to a male participant who not only met neighbors, but his girlfriend in the class.

Turning to a more serious note, Meyer points out that she does not use the words “memory” or “remember” during her lessons, as memory loss is a frequent concern for the elderly. Another concern for Meyer and Newman is the lack of funding for arts programs that serve the elderly.

“They need music and dance and art as much, maybe more, than everyone else,” explains Meyer. She and Newman are working on finding a grant to keep the ballet program at Weinberg running for years to come.

The next session of Ballet for Wellness will begin March 4 and last eight weeks. Jr

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