

DANCE GIVES BACK

As we approach the season of giving, **Marianka Swain** reports on the outstanding charitable work of three organisations



Georgina Sykes and Stuart Beaumont in DanceSyndrome performance at Brindley Theatre, Runcorn, 2011

In 2009, Jen Blackwell and her mother Sue (pictured above) founded DanceSyndrome, a company with an equal number of disabled and non-disabled members. "Jen [who has Down's

syndrome] has always had a passion for dance, but there are very few opportunities for people with disabilities," explains Sue. "We held our own development days with both disabled and

qualified dancers [‘dance artists’], experimenting with technique and choreography."

The company grew from there and has since performed at a range of venues, from regional theatres to Oldham Carnival, and delivered 70 workshops, taught by one disabled teacher and one dance artist, to more than 1,000 people.

Dance artist Sarah Jane Lockwood says: "It's been a new challenge, but my uncle has a learning disability and I've never seen it as an obstacle; it just pushes you to find creative solutions. DanceSyndrome students are incredible – they retain things I'd teach in any other class, and some go on to become teachers themselves. There's no limit to what you can achieve with the right support.

"We're not talking down to people; we're empowering young artists who happen to have disabilities. It's inspiring for students to see someone like them standing at the front of the class, earning a living doing what they love, and it's a privilege for me to facilitate that."

Sue adds: "We'd love to create a model for colleges and universities; it's one thing to have a theoretical community module, quite another to actually deliver to a mixed-ability group! We're also hoping to do more performances – Andrew Cuerden is kindly helping us mount a production next year. But I think our biggest achievement is breaking down barriers between disabled and non-disabled people: by creating this common language, we've generated lasting friendships." ➤



Party in Pink Zumbathon in aid of Breakthrough Breast Cancer at Alexandra Palace, October 16, 2011. Below, Zumba Fitness Instructor Convention in Orlando

Photograph © James McCauley



Above and right, The Parliament Hill Synergy Dancers, performance course taught by Laith Sami. Photographs by Imelda Michalczyk

The Purley Synergy Dancers, performance course taught by Zoe Hodges



“IT’S AMAZING TO SEE SO MANY PEOPLE COMING TOGETHER”

Since 2010, Zumba has raised an astonishing £2.19 million for a range of charities from 9,380 Zumbathon events held in 83 countries. “Fundraising events were an instant hit with both our instructors and students,” explains Kathryn McAuley, PR director for Zumba Fitness in the UK. “They offer a fun and healthy way to support a great cause.

“Our first ‘Party in Pink’ campaign in 2010 raised more than £300,000 for breast cancer research from over 600 Zumbathon events across America, so we decided to take it global – and 2011’s ‘Party in Pink’ raised almost £750,000 in just three months.

We’ve since launched more campaigns and a fundraising arm, Zumba Love: Movin’ for Charity – instructors can apply to host a Zumbathon event for any cause they want to support.”

Kylee McElkerney joined forces with fellow instructors Julie McCartney and Louise Doyle to organise Northern Ireland’s biggest Zumbathon event at the Odyssey Arena for local charities FIDA NI and the Mark Pollock Trust. “It was such a buzz to see our hard work pay off, from all the late nights of planning through to being on stage in front of thousands,” recalls Kylee. “It’s amazing to see so many people of all ages, sizes and backgrounds



Photograph © Zumba Fitness

dancing in sync, coming together for such a good cause – and having a blast in the process.

“We’re already planning our second arena event and we’re going to Ethiopia in January to see how the money we raised for FIDA NI has been spent. It’ll be an honour to meet the people we’ve helped, and we’ll be holding classes while we’re there, spreading some Zumba love in Africa!”

“WE FOUND A POSITIVE WAY TO KEEP HIM WITH US”

Inspirational salsa teacher and performer Lee Wright was tragically killed in a car accident aged just 24, but his legacy lives on through the Lee Wright Synergy Dance World Memorial Trust.

“His dream was to open a dance school and share salsa with a wider community; we wanted to honour that,” explains trustee Helen Savery. “We held a salsa fundraiser in 2009 and the response was just amazing. We realised we could finance projects if we held one every year, making us the only charity to raise money from and put money into salsa.

“Our projects bring expert dance teachers to those who

don’t have access to them, and who might benefit from extra support, from a course at London’s Parliament Hill School, in consultation with Kids Synergy Dance Company, to work with mixed-ability college students and a group of women recovering from addiction. People who’ve rejected help or therapy sometimes respond differently to a dance course, and they gain so much from it – a sense of achievement, fitness and the pleasure of learning a new skill while doing something fun.

“It’s been a challenge for our teachers, adapting a flirtatious club dance with tricky rhythms for very different, mostly completely novice

students, but they’ve been moved by the experience of working with people who get so much out of it, rather than those using a class as a social night warm-up.

“The gift for me is hearing people who didn’t know Lee saying how much they wished they’d met him, and those who did saying they’re so glad we found a positive way to keep him with us. Lee’s incredible attitude inspired our motto and our work: ‘Live a lot! Dance a lot!’” ●

If you’re interested in getting involved or lending support, visit the organisations’ websites:
www.dancesyndrome.co.uk
www.zumba.com/zumbalove
www.leeforever.org.uk