

## The Dancing Heart: Vital Elders Moving in Community

**Maria Genné**

### Abstract

The Dancing Heart: Vital Elders Moving in Community engages the creative, cognitive, physical, and social needs of frail elders in Minneapolis/St. Paul and outlying communities in the metropolitan area. Created and led by Kairos Dance Theatre's Artistic Director Maria Genné, along with Kairos artist/educators, the award-winning Dancing Heart offers weekly interactive dance and storytelling-based workshops for older adults, family members and caregivers through partnerships with adult day programs, long term care facilities and community organizations. The Dancing Heart invites older adults to help co-create a new vision of dance—one that is inclusive of all ages, all bodies, and many different ways of moving.

The key message of a discussion about *The Dancing Heart: Vital Elders Moving in Community*<sup>TM</sup> is that there is a body of research that is accumulating that shows that dance can positively affect the health and quality of life of older adults.

*The Dancing Heart: Vital Elders Moving in Community* engages the creative, cognitive, physical, and social needs of frail elders in Minneapolis/St. Paul and outlying communities in the metropolitan area. Created and led by Kairos Dance Theatre's Artistic Director Maria Genné, along with Kairos artist/educators, *The Dancing Heart* offers weekly, interactive dance and storytelling-based workshops for older adults, family members, and caregivers through partnerships with adult day programs, long term care facilities, and community organizations.

Kairos Dance Theatre's *The Dancing Heart: Vital Elders Moving in Community Memory Loss Program* was recently recognized by two national organizations. The Archstone Foundation and the Gerontological Health Section of the American Public Health Association presented its 2007 Award for Excellence in Program Innovation to Kairos' *The Dancing Heart* at its meeting in Washington, D.C. in November, 2007. The American Society on Aging, in collaboration with MetLife Foundation, announced that they will award one of their 2008 MindAlert Awards to *The Dancing Heart* at their joint conference with the National Council on Aging, "Aging in America," in Washington, D.C., in March 2008.

*The Dancing Heart* invites older adults to help co-create a new vision of dance—one that is inclusive of all ages, all bodies, and many different ways of moving. Over the past six years more than 100 older adults from five different sites, have participated in the program, exploring the “language of dance” through movement improvisation, the interweaving of dance and story, and the collaborative development of choreography that draws on their memories and life experiences. Our intergenerational touring performances to nursing homes, assisted living and senior centers include dancers and musicians 7 to 88 years of age. Those performances in the past year have reached more than 3,500 audience members.

Each week at each site we offer a 90-minute *Dancing Heart Playshop* as well as a 45-60 minute follow-up evaluation at the end of each session.

### **The Dancing Heart Objectives:**

- Improving elders’ flexibility, energy, balance, memory recall, and desire to interact
- Transforming elders’ beliefs about their physical abilities
- Offering a new vision of elders emphasizing their vitality and ability
- Helping older adults redefine their artistic gifts

### **Evaluation—Expected outcomes for Dancing Heart participants include:**

- Improved physical health, including increased energy, stamina, flexibility, range of motion, and balance
- Increased confidence in physical ability
- Increased sense of positive, meaningful connection to peers, younger generations, and the community at large
- Integrated skill development and increased sense of mastery in dance, improvisation, storytelling, and performance
- For participants with dementia, increased cognition, enjoyment, ability to focus, and willingness to initiate interaction; decreased anxiety

## **Research in Arts and Aging**

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We are research-based. Research has shown that dance engages people cognitively, physically, socially, and emotionally. Two research studies underlie our work. The 20-year Einstein College study, “Leisure Activities and the Risk of Dementia in the Elderly,” found that dancing is literally at the top of the list of leisure activities that appear to play a part in delaying the onset of Alzheimer’s disease (Verghese et al., 2003). “The Creativity and Aging Study,” a three-year investigation of older adults (average age = 80 years), is another important source (Cohen et al., 2006). The aim of this study was to measure the impact of professionally conducted community-based cultural programs on the physical and mental health and social activities of individuals aged 65 and older. The researchers studied groups of elders in Washington D.C., New York City, and San Francisco who worked weekly with a professional artist and reported the following results:

- Fewer falls
- Decrease in doctor visits and use of medication
- Decrease in loneliness and depression
- Increased involvement in community activities

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*The Dancing Heart:  
Vital Elders Moving in  
Community*

*The Dancing Heart—Vital Elders Moving in Community Memory Loss Program*

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In 2006 we received funding from The Society for Arts in Healthcare/Johnson and Johnson for a pilot program for a 10-month project at the Wilder Adult Day Memory Loss Program in St. Paul. With a grant from the Jay and Rose Phillips Foundation and additional funds raised by the Wilder Foundation we have been able to create and continue this unique and innovative program, now in its second year, which serves older adults who are diagnosed with mid- to late-stage Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia.

**Evidence-Based**

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Before we began the pilot project, Wilder staff administered Mini Mental State Exams (MMSE) and the Sit Stand Fall Assessment to participants. When we began the program participants had very little interaction with fellow clients. There was an exercise program, group newspaper discussion, and other traditional programs, including quite a few musical entertainers. Within two weeks, a family member called wondering what was happening on Wednesdays because their mother was initiating communication for the first time in a very long time. Another participant, who had shied away from any interaction with us as well as interaction with other clients, began to join our dancing group. Now she is an active participant and assists with less ambulatory clients and interacts regularly with others. One elder had never participated in an activity for more than 10 minutes; she is now taking part in our 90-minute playshops, leaving only if we are telling stories at the end of the session instead of dancing. The elders began anticipating dance day and remembering what day it was. One elder sang his interactions, another joined our circle and began laughing and dancing once we played the Andean music that was familiar from her childhood. Participants are showing growth as artists and performers. They are learning new skills of the language of dance as well as remembering and refining old ones. Staff began to notice lessening of anxiety in clients on the Dancing Heart day. Staff's expectations of the participants have changed. They began to see that week after week people were engaged and interacting in ways that did not seem possible because of clients' diagnoses. After eight months, Wilder staff again administered the MMSE and Sit Stand Assessment; 43% of the participants in the Dancing Heart Memory Loss Program showed improvement in both the cognitive test and the fall assessments. Both Kairos and Wilder staff are amazed and excited about the growth in the clients that we have both perceived and measured. Patricia Schrader, OTR, University of Minnesota, and her students are currently working on a qualitative study of the Wilder Dancing Heart group. Results are expected in January 2008.

**Win/Win**

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An environment of safety and acceptance is crucial to the success of an arts program for older adults. Each person's gifts are valued and contribute to the ongoing creativity of the group. We believe that as artists we can complement the ongoing therapeutic programs at each site. Artists are comfortable working with what

quite often looks like chaos. They are inspired by ideas that often appear in spontaneous and surprising ways. The underlying belief of *The Dancing Heart* is that each person has a unique gift that is waiting to be tapped and given expression. It is our job as artists to facilitate each person's artistic growth, no matter their age, background, or ability.

### November 2007

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We now fast forward from March 2006 to November 2007 at the Wilder Dancing Heart Memory Loss Program. Over time we have been encouraging elders to move from their chairs. We are doing more partnering and circle dances. Volunteers and extra staff make this easier. The staff has a very positive attitude toward our program. In the beginning they were skeptical that our program could make much difference. Now visitors and potential clients are invited on Wednesdays so they can observe our weekly playshop in action. The new director has told the staff to watch us as we work with clients and learn from us. In October the Dancing Heart group gave a 45-minute performance for families during family night. The participants were focused, articulate, and worked together as an experienced ensemble group. Additional staff members joined us in rehearsals and put time and energy in learning lines, practicing music, and making costumes. Afterward, staff noted that families interacted and sat with other families for dinner. For the first time in the 10-year history of family night, staff cleaned up a full hour later than usual because families stayed to talk with and enjoy each other. This participatory arts program has helped to strengthen positive relationships between elder dancers and their families, between other elder dancers, and between elder dancers and staff.

A few weeks later, The Dancing Heart Memory Loss Program participants traveled for the first time to the other Wilder Adult Day site in St. Paul. Their interactive performance was a hit with clients and staff in the second facility. *Dancing Heart* performers had the opportunity to feel a sense of mastery and, as a *Dancing Heart* elder gentleman said, "We put a smile on their faces."

### Moving Forward in 2008

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Currently we are looking for more research partners to study the participants of *The Dancing Heart*. We are looking for long-term partnerships so that we can continue to develop our strategic plan to pursue "Best Practice" status in the coming three to four years. We believe that we are already close to becoming a promising practice. We will need to conduct rigorous research to establish the best practice model. We will constantly be working to refine the model, improve documentation, and continue to use data to test and strengthen the model with various participants (including nursing home residents, assisted living, adult day health, Parkinson's, and those with dementia). As part of our strategic plan to develop a "Model" arts and aging program we are also pursuing the development of a training program so that we can disseminate *The Dancing Heart* model locally and nationally.

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*The Dancing Heart:*  
Vital Elders Moving in  
Community

The Dancing Heart Develops a Training Workshop—Dancing Our  
Stories: Dance and Storytelling with Older Adults

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In November of 2006 we received a three-year grant from the Helen Bader Foundation specifically recognizing our successes at the Wilder Memory Loss Adult Day Program as well as other *Dancing Heart* sites by granting us funds to develop a three-day workshop for artists, social workers, professional and family caregivers, and others who want to work with older adults. Our first workshop took place in June 2007. We are pleased with the outcome of the first workshop and the curriculum that was developed. During 2008 we will be expanding our concept of the workshop to include other elements of ongoing training in the two to three year certification process that we will require partners to complete in order to receive The Dancing Heart Best Practice Model. In year two of the Bader grant we will be contracting with the Center for Age and Community at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, under the direction of Dr. Anne Basting, to evaluate our training so we can develop it further.

Best Practice Model

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Our goals in the next three years are to develop a comprehensive evidence-based, high quality dance and storytelling program that is innovative and replicable to serve the needs of the changing elder population—increasing vital engagement and improving their overall quality of life. The Dancing Heart Best Practice Model will include experienced master teachers and expertise in a variety of artistic fields—dance, storytelling, theater and music. It will include know-how learned from developing leading-edge artistic and educational collaborative efforts in the field of creative aging, and it will utilize statistical analyses and reliable assessment measures.

References

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**Maria DuBois Genné**, M.Ed., dancer, choreographer, and educator, is the founder and artistic director of Kairos Dance Theatre, an intergenerational dance company whose performers range in age from 4 to 88 years. Genné has been developing and teaching creative dance and dramatic programs for many years. This fall she will lead a new initiative to bring *The Dancing Heart* into five Minnesota long-term care facilities. She is also a dance consultant for the National Center for Creative Aging.