



## ***Reflex Movement, Creative Expression and the Role of the Arts in Alzheimer's***

By Maria Simeone, Teaching Artist

What does the creative expression of music and dance have to offer those suffering from Alzheimer's? Why teach primitive reflexes as creative dance and musical expression as a nonclinical approach to healing? And who best to guide the process?

In 2016, I was asked by Segerstrom Center for the Arts<sup>1</sup> to create a new BrainDance<sup>2</sup> program for Alzheimer's Orange County (California) as part of their innovative "Center without Borders" outreach. Jason Holland, VP of Community Outreach Programs, was embarking on a whole new approach to bringing artistic experiences to our Alzheimer's families. We were going to "blow down the proscenium" so to speak, by providing a communal experience of creative expression to a population not previously served. That initial proposal developed into the current BrainDance program I formulated

for our Alzheimer's families in conjunction with SCFTA. I had a personal passion for this project, as well. My musician-dancing

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mother had died of vascular dementia in 2016. She is the wind beneath the creative wings of this outreach.

Throughout each year, husbands and wives, adult children and their parents, convene for playful sessions of BrainDance, group singing, and acoustic sound therapy. These music and movement workshops, each themed to a Laban<sup>3</sup> dance concept, are woven through the 5 stage "Learning Cycle"<sup>4</sup>. From workshop to workshop, participants experience primitive reflex movements (via BrainDance) through the application of different Laban dance concepts such as: space, energy, balance, and flow.



- 1.Segerstrom Center for the Arts is a leading presenter of national and international artists in America. [www.scfta.org](http://www.scfta.org)
- 2.BrainDance, a series of 8 patterns based on primitive reflexes, was created by Anne Green Gilbert in 2000
- 3.Rudolf Laban founded the philosophy that body and mind are inseparable in movement
- 4.Zull, James. *The Art of Changing the Brain*. Sterling, VA: Stylus Publishing, 2002.



These dance concepts are then applied to group singing and choreography (generated by the participants themselves). BrainDance movement and music for home application is another important aspect of our outreach. The uniqueness of our BrainDance program is that participants are put in the creative lead – exploring their full range of reflex movement and musical expression in relationship with others. As a teaching artist, my most important role is to guide them in this process and then get out of their way! When our participants connect with their bodies through BrainDance and playfully release their voices in musical expression, they become wholly

present to themselves and fully alive. For that moment in time, they are forgetful only of their limitations. THEY are in charge of the moment and THEY are immersed in their own generative process as any artist would be. My journey as a teaching artist has led me to discover that the one defining aspect of ourselves universally, is our creativity. To experience this through dance-music expression is essential to a beautiful life and is not limited to age, training, or cognitive skill. Quite the opposite, as it requires us to get beneath the over-lauded cerebrum and into our creative awareness which lives throughout our being. Thus, in the midst of an unbeautiful disease bent on destruction, we engage in the joy of construction. This is the “why” response to my non-conventional, non-clinical approach for wellness as a teaching artist.

In two short years, the program we initially assembled has grown to serve bilingual outreach to our Latino families, adults with advanced brain trauma (including but not limited to Alzheimer’s), Sound Therapy workshops, bilingual HealthRhythms<sup>5</sup> Intergenerational drum circles, and a bilingual interactive BrainDance video series free to the public world-wide. Alzheimer’s prevention and music and movement mindfulness workshops are being discussed for the future.



Projected statistics for Orange County (California) paint a picture of an ever greying population with a dramatic 1.1 million impacted by Alzheimer’s in the next 10-20 years<sup>6</sup>. This profound increase will affect


5. HealthRhythms®: Group Empowerment Drumming. Remo, Inc. Developed by Barry Bittman, M.D. and Christine Stevens, MT-BC

6. “Facts and Stats”. Alzheimer’s Association. June, 2017. Web. 26 May 2018.

all race, ethnic, and economic groups across California. It will have a defining impact on the future of California to be echoed across the United States and the world. Current research has convincingly demonstrated that music and dance can have the most substantial impact in delaying the progression of Alzheimer's<sup>7</sup>. To my knowledge, this program is the only one of its kind to integrate BrainDance, vocal expression, and the creative process for our Alzheimer's population. It's a combination that has a definite place in the arena of Alzheimer's care for both patients and caregivers. Arts organizations and artists like myself, are in a unique position to fill this need in a way that can supersede the effects of the disease while reclaiming the human spirit. I am sure that my musician-dancing mother, who gave me the gift of both, is joining in the dance.

7. "Dancing can reverse the signs of aging in the brain". *Science News*, 25 August 2017. Web. 29 May 2018.

**Photographs supplied by Segerstrom Center for the Arts**



**Maria Simeone is a California based Teaching Artist, Creator of Flexity Jig® and a Move to Learn® trainer.** *She provides brain-compatible music and movement programs to all ages from infants to seniors. She specializes in working with high-risk populations by focusing on the creative use of neuro-reflex movement, group singing, acoustic sound therapy, and drumming for wellness.*

To learn more and for the BrainDance videos for Alzheimer's, go to: [www.MusicMovestheBrain.com](http://www.MusicMovestheBrain.com)

