

A dance toward healing by veterans, their families

By Deborah Denenfeld

"Swing your partner.... Now promenade." The dancers step easily to the live music, big smiles on their faces, moving in circles and sometimes seeming to twist themselves in knots as they respond to the caller at the AmVets Hall in Germantown. Grey-haired men and women dance with young kids and everyone seems to be having a great time.

What you might not know from watching is that many of these dancers haven't danced in years. Some have never danced in their lives. And some have faced remarkable challenges in simply getting to this place—a place where they can be around others, enjoy themselves, and just relax.

In this special dance series, veterans and families affected by Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or Traumatic Brain Injuries (TBI) share the floor with others. The group meets ten times over five weeks, forming a close-knit community where veterans, spouses, and their children can gather in a safe place and share in the magic and fun of community dance. Dancing Well: The Soldier Project, a nonprofit organization based in Louisville, organized this free series.

"After each session I feel better overall," says one veteran. "I enjoy the fellowship and just having the time to relax. Being able to be out of my element, I see that my depressive state changes!" Another writes, "I don't care what kind of day I've had, I'm smiling from the time I come until the time I leave." And still another: "I get to get out and be with people. Otherwise, I'd just be sitting in my apartment, staring at the walls all by myself every day."



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Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder is a debilitating illness that develops after exposure to an extremely frightening, life threatening, or highly unsafe experience. Those affected report intense isolation and distress, including:

- acute discomfort in group settings
- difficulty relating to others
- feeling constantly tense and "on guard"
- re-experiencing the original trauma through nightmares or flashbacks
- inability to cope with daily living
- difficulty falling or staying asleep
- difficulty remembering things

The latest government statistics indicate that 1 in 4 soldiers returning from Iraq or Afghanistan have PTSD or TBI, along with countless other veterans from previous wars.

I originally came upon the idea that dance might help these individuals when psychiatrist Edwin Walker at Fort Knox contacted me about calling a dance series there. Walker worked with active duty soldiers with PTSD or TBI who were being evaluated for possible discharge or return to action overseas. He knew about community dance and wondered if it might help his clients.

Working together, Walker and I created a dance series attuned to the needs of afflicted veterans. The outcomes were amazing. One hundred percent of participating soldiers reported reduced anxiety, improved mood and memory, improved relationships, and a better outlook on the future. Remarkably, fifty percent even reported a decrease in their physical pain.

Based on these outcomes, I founded Dancing Well: The Soldier Project with a vision of providing dance experiences to afflicted veterans and their families. Eventually I plan to lead dances around the country and then train others to bring dance to this population in their home communities.

The program is designed to benefit family members as well as veterans. One mother brought her son and his roommate,



Vets, gals and Vets with families Dancing Well to the music and the calling of Deborah Denenfeld

both vets with PTSD, and later shared the impact of the experience:

They had a great time and I did as well. It's been 12 years for my son with his brain trauma and 10 for his roommate. I found my son's roommate living on the streets, and we took him in about 3 years ago. I have tried all sorts of things to see them smile—last night was the first unforced smiles I have seen from both of them. They have already thanked me numerous times and called me today to make sure we can come again tomorrow. I thank you with all my heart for what you are doing for these veterans and their families.

Other family members have shared similar stories. The young son of one of the participating veterans simply wrote, "I wish we could do this every day."

Members of the local dance community and others served as volunteer partners for veterans attending on their own and helped fill out the dance sets. Over the course of the dances, friendships formed and veterans were soon recognized and greeted by name as soon as they walked in the door.

People with PTSD often experience anxiety in large groups and unfamiliar

settings, so the dances are kept purposely small, with volunteers returning throughout the series. Each session builds on the last and dances are reviewed frequently. It is this structured, supportive environment that creates the sense of safety and community that is so powerful for these individuals.

The veterans and families who participated in the Dancing Well series are eager to continue dancing. Dancing Well: The Soldier Project plans to create an ongoing dance for local veterans and families as soon as necessary funding is raised. To make a tax-deductible donation, please go to www.DancingWell.org.

Volunteers are also needed to help with behind the scenes tasks, at dances, and with planning, publicity, and fundraising. Those wishing to volunteer, veterans and families wishing to participate, and others wanting to learn more may contact Deborah Denenfeld at Deborah@DancingWell.org or (502)889-6584.

Deborah Denenfeld is the founder and Executive Director of Dancing Well: The Soldier Project. She has over 20 years of experience as a Teaching Artist in the Schools, dance caller, and dance educator. In addition to her work at Dancing Well and in schools, she leads dancing at the local contra dance, weddings, and private parties.

