

Social Dancing

Providing a Setting For Multiple (or Magical) Engagement

by Kathryn Walsh, PAC Mentor Trainer

For the past four years, it has been my privilege to be a care partner with a very special lady named Annie. We are so fortunate to live in Manhattan, right in the heart of NYC, as there are many wonderful engagement programs for us to attend. There are programs focusing on museums, art making, music, horticulture classes and more; all geared toward participation by PLWD (People Living With Dementia) and their care partners.



When I met Annie, she was an Emerald but as her journey has moved along, we have found some of the programs a bit more challenging for her and others on similar journeys. There simply aren't as many programs for Ambers, Rubies, and Pearls as there are for Sapphires, Diamonds, and Emeralds. Then, in 2015, we found IT! We found an amazing program for us and many others. It is a Social Tea Dance sponsored by an inspired group called [Rhythm Break Cares](#) (RBC).

Once or twice a month, we gather at the RBC ballroom dance studios. We are greeted by a number of very special dance instructors. They serve light refreshments, we gather in a large

circle around the room, and then the dancing and fun begins!

RBC is unique in their program as they focus on how music, movement, and touch are fundamental powers in regeneration. They encourage inclusion and participation by all GEMS® levels. There is musical, physical, and social interaction for both PLWD and their care partners. They are conscious to play a wide variety of musical styles to appeal to many different life experiences. It is also wonderful to have folks be partnered in traditional dance positions that many were taught in their youth. Many care partners have witnessed *awakenings* in this setting by PLWD who live mostly in their most private and guarded shells. There is spirit and joy abounding here. It is tangible. There is an extraordinary and unusual magic of connection that is fostered in this setting – for ALL who attend.



A few months ago, the leaders of RBC, Nathan Hesock and Stine Moen approached me because they had noticed that the way I interacted with the PLWD was a bit different

than what they were used to seeing from other care partners. They noticed some successes I had in connecting with folks who generally weren't as responsive. When they got curious with me, I told them about some of my training with PAC and told them about the special skills of Positive Physical Approach™ (PPA) and Hand-under-Hand™ (HuH). They wondered if I would be willing to put together a short program for them to present at their January 2016 Instructor's meeting. So of course I did!

I shared with them some awareness and knowledge about the changing senses of a PLWD. I then introduced them to PPA™ and HuH™ to help them make a personal connection to get them in the best position to move into a dance relationship.

It has been a few months since I worked with the instructors and I wanted to check in to see what, if any, changes they have seen since learning PPA™ and HuH™. Here are the answers to a few questions I posed:

K: "How is PPA™ shifting how you connect with PLWD?"

S: "I am more aware of my approach and find it easier to approach individuals. I am trying to build the skills into our dance programs. Learning how to help people get up and sit back down has been very helpful. I find it hard to get some of our clients either to walk to their chair or sit back down. They freeze or seem anxious. Using the technique of using rhythm of the music or creating a rhythm to walk and sit helps me help them without much struggle."

N: "The most striking thing I learned is about their narrowing field of vision. Often, when we approach for the first time, people seem confused. Saying hello with my hand close to my face in their field of vision and then offering my hand is very effective. Also, normally, what I would do to help someone out of their chair is to hold their arms and use my body weight to *hoist* them. This didn't always work. You showed me how to get to the side and rock them to a standing position. This is very effective."

K: "Have you had any precious moments happen perhaps because a door was opened by using PPA™?"

S: "After the seminar, I was watching one of our instructors giving PPA™ a try to connect with a lady in a wheelchair. As a taller person, he got down to her level and gave a compliment. She'd been refusing to interact with this instructor before, but this time she had a positive response and got up and moved with him for a bit. The importance of getting down to her level and the awareness of the lack of peripheral vision was clearly fruitful in this situation."

"We have another instructor, Hooba who has had great success with PPA™ with a lady in a wheelchair. She's had a stroke and has a hard time moving her left arm. There's a lot of tension and resistance. By staying on her level, having eye contact, and making a connection, she relaxed and

was able to move with Hooba for 5-8 minutes. This was such a great moment! A huge success!”

K: “Anything else you would like to share?”

S: “Utilizing PPA™ and understanding dementia is strengthening every dance session we host. Now we want to learn about the GEMS®!”

Great news – Hooba has moved to Florida and is now in the planning stages to start Rhythm Break Cares Florida!

You can keep tabs on or ask questions of this wonderful group on the [RBC website](#).