

MY PARKINSON'S STORY

My name is Chris Daigre. I have been teaching dance in the community for over 25 years. I enjoy it because it physically feels good on my body and it is mentally rewarding to know I am enhancing people's lives. My identity, self-esteem, creativity and values are directly connected to my participation in dance and the arts. I have experienced and understand what dance does for you mentally and physically. In all the trials and tribulations of life, my appreciation and consistent participation in dance has always been the stable foundation that has kept me moving, progressing and overcoming.

About 7 years ago, I noticed some slight changes in the way I moved. Specifically, I was very slow getting in and out of my car. I would periodically shuffle my feet in small steps when I walk. I could not stand at a sink without leaning on it. I attributed all of this to aging and normal fatigue. I didn't think much of these slight changes because it didn't prevent me from doing my normal physical routine. My primary care doctor did comprehensive bloodwork to rule out other things.

Currently, those slight changes are still there but a little more pronounced. My primary doctor ruled out things with more bloodwork and recommended I see a Neurologist. At 55 years old, I was diagnosed with Parkinson's. My initial reaction was calm and introspective. In one way, I was relieved to know what was going on. Immediately, I also wanted to know more about the disease. When I heard there was currently no cure, I thought my future was predestined and limited. Even with those thoughts, I didn't feel anger, fear, resentment or sadness. My initial thoughts revolved around what have I done in my life and how does that make me feel. The most prevalent vision was my lifelong commitment to embrace and participate in the simple joy and inspiration of dance and how I learned to facilitate that experience for others. With a large dose of positive self-esteem and authentic purpose, dance has kept me grounded for many years in often challenging circumstances.

As I face the challenges of Parkinson's daily medications and slow rigid movement, I keep focus on my experiences and values. I searched out and had inspiring meetings with NW chapter of American Parkinson's Disease

Association, NW Parkinson's Foundation and The Parkinson's Fitness Project. I came away with a whole new perspective on Parkinson's. Even though there is no current cure, I have learned there is a lot I can do to slow the progression. I started really paying attention to how my body felt when I didn't move and when I did move. Specifically, the movement I was doing in the dance classes I taught. All the slowness and rigidity I experience during the medication off periods was much less after a series of movements from the dance class. I have always enjoyed the way the body feels after a progression of dance movement. To have Parkinson's and feel greater mobility with ease is extremely profound.

I feel wherever life takes you, it is mentally and physically healthy to do the best you can with what you got. It is a journey that has many highs and lows. My integrity, values, patience and hopes for the future are all challenged 24/7. As odd as this may sound, Parkinson's is teaching me about me. I can't ignore it and pretend it doesn't exist. I have become more in tune with what my body needs at every moment. If I am feeling tired, my only remedy is to take a nap and not push myself to do more. My body will literally not respond if I push more. The same can be said for food. What I put in my body has a direct profound effect on how I feel. These stark contrasts keep me focused on doing what is best for me. There are times when I don't feel well regardless of getting enough rest, eating well and taking the medications. This is the reality of the disease. Symptoms will vary in each individual. I keep perspective and persevere.

With all things considered, I envision how I want to live with Parkinson's. I want to continue to dance and teach with adjustments not limitations. The adjustments would accommodate a new constituency of Parkinson's people. I want to take what is supposed to be limiting and turn it into something uplifting and inspiring.

The following words define the dance class I teach:

Natural

Functional

Full body range of motion

Great music

Rhythmic

Fun.

The Parkinson's community inspires me. The support and encouragement are infectious. I am looking forward to sharing what has sustained me through all of this.