

Sarah Leversee_ Dave record oral history (2024-02-06 11_06 GMT-7)

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David Allison 00:02

All right, Sarah, thank you so much for joining me today. I wanted to just ask you a couple of questions and kind of see how you're doing here, for the Broomfield Out Loud project. And, I want to start with just having you introduce yourself, just share a little bit more about yourself and kind of how you ended up at Art as Action and just in your position here in Broomfield.

Sarah Leversee 00:25

Thank you so much. My name is Sarah Leversee, and I'm the founder and artistic director of Art is Action. We've been a part of the Broomfield community since 2015. And, we started out in Boulder back in 2002 and then found a home in Broomfield at the Colorado Conservatory of Dance. And, they were very welcoming to us, we have an office here and studio space at a far more affordable price than we'd be, we'd be able to swing otherwise. We've been happy to become part of the Broomfield community and part of the Colorado Conservatory of Dance ballet community. We're a Dance, primarily a Dance for Parkinson's program. The majority of our dancers have Parkinson's disease or other diagnoses that impact their movement. And, we have classes, and we also have performances with our dancers.

David Allison 01:35

Wonderful. Can you tell me more, just a little bit about, kind of, your personal story, your personal journey? How did you come to be in this area, you know, that sort of thing. Your background, maybe.

Sarah Leversee 01:51

I've been a dancer since childhood, and I came to Boulder to go to CU. I'm a Colorado native, so I didn't travel far for college. And, I moved around a lot in the years coming out of college, but I always ended up back in or near Boulder, and lots of different dance projects in various parts of the Denver Metro area. I started Art is Action in 2002, primarily because I was an injured dancer, and I wanted to still perform. But most companies didn't want to accommodate what I could or couldn't do, understandably, so I decided to do it for myself and for my friends. And then that was, it became, I didn't know it was going to become my life's work. At first, it was a passion project, and something that I just loved to do, and then I got the opportunity to perform as well. But eventually, it became a nonprofit. And, we shifted our focus in 2011. My uncle was diagnosed with Parkinson's in 2005. His name is Wayne Gilbert, and

he was a performer with Art is Action from day one. He's a poet and an actor. And he was, had been in every single show.

David Allison 03:28

Wow.

Sarah Leversee 03:29

And so, he was very involved, and he and I are very close. And fairly soon after he got diagnosed, we found out about Dance for PD, which is an organization in Brooklyn, New York. It's an organization that lives under the banner of Mark Morris Dance Group, and they just happened to be doing a training in Denver literally less than a month after we found out about it. There was a story on PBS NewsHour, and we say that our emails crossed, and we said, Gosh, we have to do this. And so, again, like I had been, you know, when I started Art is Action, I was injured, I pretty much have spent my entire adult dancer life being injured, unfortunately. However, that really has given me the insight and a different kind of perspective to do this physically integrated dance teaching and performing. And so, we created Reconnect with your Body, which is our dance methodology. And, we say that it's dance for people with and without Parkinson's. As I said, we have some folks with Parkinson's, some folks with other diagnoses and some folks that are human beings in a body that just want to move.

David Allison 05:00

Wow.

Sarah Leversee 05:01

And so, it doesn't really matter the diagnosis or not. And when I, like, when I talk about being injured and having insight, that doesn't mean that I understand what it's like to have Parkinson's, like, no one understands. You're the expert on your own body, you know what's happening in your body, no one else can tell you. However, the idea of letting go of dance perfection and instead bringing in dance as a tool to move, to have fun, to express yourself, and to learn and connect about your body, and figure out, you know, what are, the things Wayne talks about a lot is, dance became something he could do, amongst so many things that he could no longer do.

David Allison 05:54

Wow.

Sarah Leversee 05:55

And for me, that was, as a dancer, as a very frustrated and defeated dancer who felt like I'd hit a lot of dead ends, it felt incredibly powerful to be like, Oh, this is what all this has been for, is to teach these classes and to work with these people. And then, our performing company evolved over the next few years to have more and more of our Reconnect dancers in the show.

David Allison 06:24

Oh, neat.

Sarah Leversee 06:25

And now, here in 2024, we just had a show: there were 10 cast members, and six of them have Parkinson's, and two others had different diagnoses. And so, it was a vast majority, and an alternative side of dance. I'm really proud of it, and I feel like this kind of work is what I was always meant to do, that all my dance training and all the wrong roads really led me here.

David Allison 07:00

I love that. And, one of the things that you said that just really stuck out to me was not seeing dance as perfection, but as a way of kind of, like, using your body, understanding your body, that sort of thing. And that, that just really struck me, and I wonder if you could just, kind of, share maybe a little bit about some of the things that you've seen from dancers that you work with, who maybe are, you know, kind of like your uncle, entering into into that space, having, you know, maybe felt frustrated that they can't do things they used to do or that they, you know, have had dead ends with other kind of ways of being and what that was like in your situation.

Sarah Leversee 07:46

We've had a lot of different types of dancers, different types of bodies, of course, every body is unique. And for anyone who has danced previously, which, we've had some technical dancers that come in with Parkinson's, that are shedding that idea that dance has to fit in a very specific and small box, and if it doesn't, then it's just not worth doing. And so, but then, we've also had a lot of dancers, of course, who came in after a Parkinson's diagnosis who had never danced at all. And, you know, one of our dancers made her stage debut at 72.

David Allison 08:36

Wow, that's amazing.

Sarah Leversee 08:37

It is, it's so amazing. And so, there's a couple of different ways that dance becomes this, sort of, language and method of interacting with your own body. One is, when you're very first starting, is letting go of a lot of the expectations, right? That it's like, Oh, I can't, you know. We hear a lot of, Oh, I can't dance, or I only dance, you know, when I'm drunk at a wedding, or I've never danced before, you know. It's too embarrassing, or, I used to dance, but I couldn't possibly do it again.

David Allison 09:13

Yeah, yeah.

Sarah Leversee 09:14

It's too heartbreaking. And so, in that case, it's about, sort of, unlearning all of those limited expectations and relearning what is possible. And in some ways, that's what's possible, as far as if you're just beginning a relationship with dance. It's like, Oh, I had no idea it could be all these things. It could be falling in love with music, it could be being a part of a community. And, it could be a really useful way to express all the big feelings that are happening. And so, kind of, unlearning and learning, and part of that learning is being willing to listen to your own body and modify what you're able to do. So, I teach choreography, and then each dancer translates it into their own body. Even though my arm is reaching, you know, all the way up, straight arm, someone else's arm might be reaching here. That's

not about less than, it's about finding the way that is possible for you, that makes it possible to lose yourself in the flow of dance and not be like, Oh, gosh, I gotta make sure not to hurt myself, right? Because if you're, if you're walking on that edge of potential pain, discomfort, overexertion, you can't relax, you can't feel the flow of dance. You're constantly like, I can't fall, I can't fall, I gotta stay on this edge. So, I encourage dancers to take a few steps away from that edge and really hear what is possible in their bodies. And so, as time goes on, that modification becomes a skill in itself. And so, they're not just learning choreography, they're learning choreography and then translating it for their own bodies, and that can be different from day to day, Parkinson's is so tricky.

David Allison 11:13

Yeah, the ups and downs, and all those things that happen.

Sarah Leversee 11:17

Yeah, one day might be, you can do "10 times more," quote, unquote, than you could the day before. And part of it is accepting that, as well, like, really arriving in the moment, and letting go of the big expectations, but also letting go of the daily expectations and just being here in this body, knowing that you're in a supportive community, knowing that the goal is to move and have fun. And even moving, you know, we talk about that you get a gold star for showing up. And so, if you need to watch class, if you need to dance in your imagination, you still have your gold star.

David Allison 12:05

Yeah.

Sarah Leversee 12:06

And so, what's amazed me as a more traditionally trained dancer is the real skill that develops in this method of dancing, with the modification of the, like, surrender to whatever day you're in. And, and the really cool creative stuff that comes from that, right? Like, if you have to modify something, sometimes I'll look at someone who's modifying something and be like, Oh, that's better than what I came up with, let's do that instead. Then, the choreography evolves, and it becomes collaborative. And so, it's interesting, each dancer has their individual story, of course, and we see a lot of connection in different people's experience. And ultimately, we're all dancers, regardless of what our medical records say, and regardless of what we've left outside the studio.

David Allison 13:11

Wow, I love that kind of being unified on being a dancer, and that that is the piece, you know, that you come to it with. Love that. Can you tell me just a little bit more about, you know, how people learn about your organization, and how you, kind of, have shown up in the community in different ways? It sounds like you have a great partnership with the Colorado Conservatory of Dance, but just maybe explain a little bit more about some of those things.

Sarah Leversee 13:43

Our big goals are to make sure that the Parkinson's community knows that dance is an option for them and see themselves represented in our dancers, and to show the dance community that this different kind of physically integrative dance is available to them, too, or that it exists, right? If you're living in that

perfection box, and you see a group like ours, and you're like, Hang on, they're having a lot more fun than I am, what's happening here? Like, you know. And so, those are sort of our two primary goals. And what happens for the Parkinson's side, we visit support groups, we present at conferences, we try to be where people are that have Parkinson's that we have the opportunity to ideally perform for, or engage with, have interactive, you know, presentations, things like that. And so, we have danced with the Broomfield support group, which happens at the Broomfield Rec Center, and they're a great group. We had a great time. We basically just do a full, with support groups we have closer to an hour, so we do, like, a full class. But it's not in a dance studio, it's usually in some sort of conference room or, you know, you never know what kind of room you're gonna walk into

David Allison 15:07

Like a meeting place with a nice rug or carpet.

Sarah Leversee 15:11

Exactly, right. And so again, speaking of modifying, you have to be ready to adapt to whatever the room is. And, one thing I haven't mentioned yet is how important chairs are in our work. Anything done standing can be done seated. We start class in chairs, people perform from chairs, chairs are always an option. And so, again, when you're trying to find that flow, if standing is becoming too difficult for balance reasons, for exertion reasons, and once you can sit, and you're like, Oh, my gosh, I feel so free, right? That's huge, so, of course, when we go to support groups, we need chairs. But sometimes the chairs have arms on them, and sometimes they have wheels, which is like, Oh, no.

David Allison 16:04

Oh, the worst, yeah.

Sarah Leversee 16:05

Yeah. So, it's really, it's interesting to go to all these different places and still show like, We can dance, like, we can all dance together. And even if that's the only time that group ever dances, even if they don't come dance with us, or dance with other programs, like, they've experienced the dance themselves, and they've witnessed that it's a possibility, you know. And so, we think that there's a lot of value in that. And on the dance side, it's interesting because, of course, the Colorado Conservatory of Dance is a pre-professional ballet conservatory, right? So like, very, you know, more inside that box that I was talking about, of, like, this classical ballet, these remarkable young dancers. But then they have us, you know, around as well, walking the halls, and we perform every year in their adult dance show called DanceFound and love getting to be a part of the community that way. And then, we also have our shows here, their big studio transforms into a theater.

David Allison 17:21

Oh, cool.

Sarah Leversee 17:22

So, we have our shows here. And honestly, like, I feel like sometimes we're one of Broomfield's best kept secrets, we're still kind of figuring out how to be more known. And because, you know, we can get in our little corner of a larger nonprofit, right? Like, you're in my little office, like, we can sort of get

insulated, we do a lot of performances. In Boulder, we did the Presenting Denver Dance Festival last year, which was really amazing, at Newman center. So, but, we would definitely like to, kind of, be more known in the Broomfield community and figure out how to include more people, involve more people, and for people to, like, if you mentioned Art is Action to be like, What? That's not what we want. We want, Oh, yes, we know who they are, so...

David Allison 18:25

Thank you so much. I really appreciate that, and yeah, as you're talking about Art is Action and what you do, I'm thinking to myself exactly what you just said, which is that more people should know about you. And Broomfield needs to be aware of this work that you're doing in the community, and the dancers, and the work that they're doing, which is really incredible, so thank you for that. And yeah, I do share that, that desire and hope, as well, with you. I think that's really neat. So, can you tell me just maybe a little bit more? What are some things, you said you kind of started in Boulder, and then you moved to Broomfield, in part because of some of the cost, that sort of thing? And, you've mentioned a little bit, you know, you've been, you go to the Broomfield Rec Center for the group that meets there. Anything else about the Broomfield community that you either appreciate or that you kind of maybe wish was different? Just kind of general things about this community?

Sarah Leversee 19:28

That's a really good question. We have performed at the Broomfield auditorium. We did, I think, three, three years in a row, we did a show there. And that's a great space, that's a really beautiful space. It's incredibly difficult to get into now, unfortunately. And, we have some accessibility, some heightened accessibility needs now, which impacts where we can perform, but I do love that that space exists. Even just that whole area, the auditorium, the library, the Rec Center, like, it's just this beautiful collection of art and community, and that's amazing. I think the struggle is how spread out everything is, right?

David Allison 20:18

Right.

Sarah Leversee 20:19

Like, we're here, we're off of Industrial Lane, pretty close to the Flatirons Mall. And like, it's pretty, it feels far, and it feels very expansive of, again, trying to find community. One thing that does happen, or did happen in Boulder, when we were still there, is, kind of, that built-in community, there's lots of different, lots of arts organizations. They all work together, they, you know, all these people know these people, and know these people, and so that's something that I would love to find in Broomfield.

David Allison 21:01

Yes.

Sarah Leversee 21:02

I can't say declaratively that it doesn't exist, but we haven't found it yet. And, I think that it just makes it a little more difficult because it's a more suburban area, against the best efforts, because I see

everything that, like, the city of Broomfield, that the Chamber of Commerce, you know, there's different organizations that do amazing work. And, it just, we haven't quite found our niche here.

David Allison 21:27

Yeah, yeah. No, I think that's a really good point. And, I agree that there's some, kind of, both historical and geographical challenges that are just, kind of, built in with the layout of the city and how it developed over time, so that they're, like, these little pockets...

Sarah Leversee 21:46

Right.

David Allison 21:47

...of spaces, rather than, you know, kind of one central gathering place and kind of easy, you know, access, you know, from one side to the other, like, even just crossing US 36 sometimes feels like a barrier, right? Like...

Sarah Leversee 21:59

Totally, yeah,

22:00

...it's just, you know, it presents challenges, for sure. Yeah, so, good. I'm wondering if there's anything in particular that you wanted to share, kind of about the future of your organization? Like, where do you see yourself in, you know, 5, 10 years, that sort of thing?

Sarah Leversee 22:20

That is an excellent question. It's interesting, because, of course, as an organization, we are faced with a lot of the same challenges as our individual dancers, which is, kind of, not being able to predict a future because of Parkinson's, having to be ready to adapt. We found those skills really useful during the pandemic, obviously, as we were, it wasn't easy, let me just say, of course, it wasn't, it wasn't easy for anyone. And like we, our folks in our organization, we're ready to adapt, right? Like, because that's, that's where we live. That's where we are.

David Allison 23:07

That's what you do, yeah.

Sarah Leversee 23:08

And so, sometimes it's hard to think about predicting the future. And because Parkinson's is a progressive disease, it's especially hard to think about the future, and for a lot of our dancers, the pandemic really pushed fast-forward on that progression, and it's been really hard. But, I hope that we can bring in enough new people to support the people that have been here longer, and so, we can sort of infuse some energy into the group. I, you know, I want to make sure that we keep performing, and a big part of our performances is the creative process that builds up to the performance. Again, it's very collaborative, lots of different voices, everyone gets to be heard, and their voices are amplified. And so,

that feels really important, more than just class, that deepening of experience into performance. And, I would just love to be known and be out there...

David Allison 24:21

Yeah.

Sarah Leversee 24:22

...more than our small little corner of the world because I think there's a lot of possibility here in Broomfield, and it's just a matter of finding the right equation.

David Allison 24:34

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. No, I love that, and thank you so much for sharing that. It's kind of the future and the dreams, those things are really important. But also, I love your approach to, like, appreciating what you have now, too, and that's, that's great. So, is there anything we didn't talk about that we missed that you really wanted to mention?

Sarah Leversee 25:00

I think the biggest, the thing that is the most special about Art is Action is the sense of belonging. And somehow, we just, I don't know how we do it, but we attract the most amazing people, and everyone is so open, and warm, and big-hearted. And, you know, it's just this amazing community, and I think sometimes groups are so tight with each other that when someone new comes in, they feel alienated or like they could never be a part. And, what we found with our dancers is, it's the exact opposite, like someone new walks in, and it's just like, you know, Welcome, you're one of us now, and here we go, you know. And, I just find that really remarkable. I think that is partly because dance really does bring people together. I also think things like Parkinson's bring people together because there is that sort of kinship and that knowing that can only happen when you're going through a similar experience. And so, I think that's a really unique combination of things. And, you know, one of my dancers told me the other day that she doesn't have to pretend to be normal here. When she's out in the world, she's trying to pretend to be normal. Whereas when she's here at Dance, she doesn't have to pretend she can just be, you know, who she is that day, what she's experiencing that day as a person with Parkinson's. And that really, that, to me, kind of says it all, that there's a safety, and a comfort, and a freedom in being a part of this community.

David Allison 26:52

Absolutely, and that's really beautiful and speaks to the, kind of, impact of those two things combined, being a safe space for people to enter in and welcoming, and then being able to use their bodies in whichever way they can, through that form of dance. It's just beautiful. So, I really appreciate your time today, Sarah, and yeah, thank you so much.

Sarah Leversee 27:19

Thank you, Dave.

David Allison 27:22

Have a great rest of your day.

Sarah Leversee 27:23

You too. Take care. Thanks so much.

David Allison 27:24

Take care, yeah.

Sarah Leversee 27:26

Bye.