

Inspiring Duo Dance By Example

Wednesday 31 January, 2018

Jen Blackwell and Becky Rich are the best of friends. They share a passion for dance and spend many hours enjoying each other's company. But they are not just the best of friends, they are a force for good, challenging perceptions and trying to make the world a better place, using dance as their weapon of choice!

Jen and Becky were brought together through inclusive dance charity DanceSyndrome. The charity was founded by Jen and her mum Sue Blackwell in 2009 after 10 years of unsuccessfully searching for suitable training to enable Jen to become a community Dance Leader. Jen, who happens to have Down's syndrome, had attended mainstream school but could not find mainstream dance training that could accommodate a person with a learning disability. During the search for training, Jen and Sue had met many other people with disabilities in similar situations and they were inspired to do something to make the world of community dance more accessible.

In 2010 Jen advertised for dancers and got over 100 enquiries! She selected 14 dancers to work with, half of whom had learning disabilities. Together they have grown into a dedicated, inclusive group of learning-disabled Dance Leaders and performers.

If you ask Jen why she started DanceSyndrome, the answer is simple "I live for dance, it's my passion and my life. I have a right to a life of my choosing. My future lies in dance. I've always wanted to share my passion for dance with others and to get everybody dancing."

Essentially, that is what DanceSyndrome does; in addition to performing on stage at events and conferences, the charity now provides five community workshops that are all fully inclusive, allowing anyone, regardless of age, race, gender or disability, to come along and join in at a pace that suits them in a supportive environment. The workshops are designed and co-led by a learning-disabled Dance Leader and a supporting Dance Artist and many participants have described it as inspirational to see a dance activity that is led by a person with a disability.

It was at one of these weekly workshops that Becky started her journey with DanceSyndrome in 2014. She loved the sessions so much she went on to complete DanceSyndrome's unique 'Dance by Example' leadership training course, which gives people with and without disabilities the skills to lead community dance workshops. Becky's confidence grew enormously thanks to the training. This increase in confidence, combined with her improved dancing and leadership skills, enabled Becky to independently take on the role of Dance Leader at a local day centre, separate from DanceSyndrome.

Jen and Becky have recently worked together on a number of different projects and they are both truly following their dreams of having successful careers in dance. Along with 12 other dancers they helped to choreograph and perform DanceSyndrome's performance piece "Orbit" which is an hour long celebration of the dancers' connections to nature and the universe. After performing the piece in venues across Lancashire and Greater Manchester in early 2017 and getting amazing audience responses, the charity ran a fundraising campaign to take the show to the Edinburgh Fringe Festival in August 2017. The Fringe Festival experience was a huge confidence boost for everyone involved, but Becky especially excelled at promoting the shows and was thrilled to be interviewed on the Royal Mile by a journalist from Humans of the Fringe.

Both Jen and Becky are both confident public speakers and they are both passionate about disability rights. In 2017 they travelled to many high profile events across the UK to talk about how DanceSyndrome has empowered them and how they want to challenge perceptions of disabled people and see more opportunities for inclusion. Their speeches combined with emotional dance performances have a huge impact on audience members. Seeing is believing and Jen and Becky both demonstrate that disability doesn't have to be a barrier; people of all ages and abilities can follow their dreams with the right support.

Jen often says "I am changing people's lives through dance", and she is 100% correct! Research with participants in DanceSyndrome workshops showed that they report many improvements in their lives after a workshop, including feeling physically fitter, having improved mental health, feeling that they have a better social life, having a sense of belonging and being included, being more able to communicate and ultimately just feeling happier. They are also inspired to see someone with a disability succeeding in living a life of their choosing.

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But it goes deeper than that. Jen and Becky have a true, heartfelt friendship. They share their passion for dance and have shared aspirations and it has given them a genuine connection to each other that they would never have found if not for DanceSyndrome.

As Jen's mum, Sue, explains "Up until Jen was 28 she thought she had friends because she interacted with people so she assumed she had friends, but what she had was acquaintances. She had never experienced what friendship was all about. She had nobody who valued her for who she was and wanted to be around her for who she was. She only started to enjoy the joy of friendship when DanceSyndrome got going."

In the last three years, DanceSyndrome has gone from strength to strength. Jen won Inspirational Woman of the Year at the 2015 EVA Awards. The Dance Leader team won the Sporting Choice Award at the 2016 Learning Disability and Autism Awards. Becky won Volunteer of the Year at the 2016 Lancashire County Council Pride Awards. DanceSyndrome was chosen as Not-for-Profit of the Year at the 2017 Red Rose Awards. Significant funding has come in to the charity from Spirit of 2012, Big Lottery Fund, Natwest Skills and Opportunities Fund, Arts Council England and many other local funding bodies.

All of this is vital to the future success of the charity from a business point of view, but if you ask Jen and Becky what the is the most important thing to come from DanceSyndrome's work, there is no doubt they will tell you that it is their wonderful friendship!

If you would like to know more about the life-changing work that DanceSyndrome does, you can visit www.dancesyndrome.co.uk or email info@dancesyndrome.co.uk

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