

Student-run seniors summer camp puts the “art” in heart

Heart & Soul camp for seniors

Ryan McNutt - June 14, 2012, DalNews



Seniors taking part in a sing-along at the Heart & Soul Camp (Danny Abriel photo)

“My arms!” shrieked the patient. The excited yelp immediately grabbed the attention of Jesse Robson and Kayla Mallery.

The two Dal students had organized this dance session, part of a weekly program they’ve been running in geriatric restorative care at the QEII Health Sciences Centre.

They were worried that the woman had hurt herself. Quite the opposite actually, as the participant quickly clarified. “My arms...they feel alive!”

Ms. Robson says it was exactly the sort of moment that inspired her to start the program in the first place. The dance sessions, which have been running for several months now, see Ms. Robson and Ms. Mallery teaching a variety of dances—Latin, Hawaiian, African and more—to seniors in long-term recovery from major surgery.

Now, they’re expanding their program into a summer day camp pilot project called Heart & Soul. The camps involve more than 19 volunteers delivering a full suite of arts programming, once a week, to upwards of 35 seniors – the majority of whom are experiencing mental, physical and/or financial challenges.

Activities include not just dance, but photography, art, poetry and more. “It’s been a really great opportunity to make friends, get out in the community and learn about parts of Halifax that I never knew existed,” says Ms. Robson, who is originally from Newfoundland and will be enrolled in Dalhousie’s physiotherapy program this fall.

“It’s also a chance to form one-on-one relationships with another generation. It’s been really interesting to learn the stories about what Halifax was like back in the day, and their reflections on current events. So many have had such fascinating lives.”

Connecting with expression

The organizers have extensive backgrounds in dance: Ms.

Robson has done work using dance as an outreach tool for special populations during her undergrad in Montreal, from HIV-positive children to street kids.

And Ms. Mallery, who just finished her BSc in neuroscience at Dal, has danced since she was three. “It was a great way to connect with artistic expression, but when I went to university I lost that a bit, not being as connected to the dance world,” she explains. “For me, personally, this has helped reconnect me with dance in a different way, bridging the knowledge that I learned in school.”

With the evening dance program, Ms. Robson and Ms. Mallery do a lot more than get patients to move. They choreograph the dances so that wheelchair-bound patients can perform them, and they spend a lot of time detailing the history and culture behind the dances.

That holistic approach resonates with patients, who come referred by recreation therapists and geriatric physicians.

“We did a session on Hawaiian dance, getting participants to come up with their own interpretations of the lyrics in dance,” says Ms. Robson. “Some of these participants had pretty advanced dementia and were somewhat non-verbal, but they began communicating really expressively through dance, coming up with some creative, elegant movements.”

Giving back

The organizers have seen similar discoveries in the

summer camp sessions – already they’ve done collaborative poetry, sing-alongs, a “junk orchestra” with found materials and theatre.

They’ve been sharing the details regularly on their Happily Ever Active [program blog](#). Their hope is to find ways to build on Happily Ever Active going forward, perhaps by offering similar programming to long-term care facilities throughout HRM. “It’s great giving back to the community,” says Ms. Mallery. “I grew up here, and it’s given me so many opportunities, so it’s great to give something back. It’s a way to blend my interest in science and my love for dance, connecting people who can teach me so much. “



Jesse Robson (left) and fellow volunteer Isabel Lavender lead the program's participants in song. (Danny Abriel photo)

This summer camp program was funded by the Robert Pope Foundation.