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Dance your way to health

Noosa Today, Noosa



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By Margaret Maccoll

“Dance is an elixir with the power to transform older people’s lives,” says dance practitioner Gail Hewton who is on a quest to inform the population of the benefits of dance for older people.

For the past eight years Gail has run RIPE Dance providing dance experiences tailored to meet the needs of older people with respect to their physical, social, emotional and cognitive abilities and aspirations.

Gail brings to her work a lifetime of dance experience as a professional choreographer, director and producer working for organisations such as Expressions Dance Company, Brisbane Powerhouse and Brisbane Festival as well as teaching at schools, universities, TAFE and in the community.

In 2018 she created a 15-minute dance film starring a cast of Noosa seniors aged 60-101 titled In a Different Space that was screened at 19 national and international film festivals in Australia, US, UK, Canada, Ireland, Brazil and Spain.

Gail has combined forces with Julie Chenery, a former executive director of Ausdance and video producer, as co-directors of GOLD Moves Australia (GMA).

Working with video production and training service Source Media, Gail and Julie have created a project earmarked by Noosa Council for a Regional Arts Development grant to create a suite of short videos to promote dance for older people to seniors, dance teachers, health workers and organisations and build on their own knowledge of video production.

“It’s just slowly expanding it. We have a big plan working with dance practitioners,” Gail said. “They’re not just teachers. They lead people in dance experiences. There are different ways of working with dance with older people.

“The wonderful thing about dance is it’s exercise in disguise.”

Dance has greater benefits to other exercise classes besides being a fun activity. Retention rates are much higher and it’s more social.

Gail said for a group of older people the social side becomes more important over time.

“And we have a jolly good time,” she said.

The ageing population is increasing presenting a need for programs to improve and maintain their health and wellbeing. “Dance offers a viable solution,” Gail said. “Growing research supports this.

“The dance combination of music and

movement is powerful and enticing.”

RIPE Dance has had such a very strong following, classes are at capacity and Gail cannot fulfil all the requests she receives for classes.

The situation was the same elsewhere with programs running at capacity at Queensland Ballet, Belconnen Arts Centre in Canberra and the UK’s Dance to Health, a dance-based falls prevention program, she said.

Ausdance Victoria’s research indicates insufficient dance teachers to answer the current demand throughout Australia, she said.

Drawing on her extensive experience as an educator, Gail initiated GMA to provide professional development for dance teachers and health workers and promote dance to older people and aged care organisations.

Gail has travelled nationally and internationally to research and develop her expertise in this field.

She has become a leader in regard to focusing on the health and wellbeing aspects of dance for older people but says there is much more scope to build on research in this area.

GMA’s mission is to optimise the health of older people by encouraging dance participation. They plan to do that by raising awareness of the many benefits dance offers by demonstrating older people participating and enjoying dance activities through videos and by increasing the supply of dance teachers offering quality programs through training.

“Unless they see older people doing it the penny doesn’t drop,” Gail said.

“Older people are a different demographic. There’re not enough teachers out there providing programs. They need professional development.

“Older people are wonderful to work with. They’re enthusiastic and committed. I’m a little bit passionate about this. I’ve loved teaching them dance. It’s very rewarding.”

About 100 participants, who live independently, regularly attend Gail’s classes more than once a week and report back on its impact and their personal improvements. For the past five she has also led dance sessions for residents of a local aged care home.

Her work has been endorsed by physiotherapists, occupational therapists and aged care staff for its effectiveness for falls prevention, dementia, social connectedness and other health benefits for this population.



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Dance is exercise in disguise.



Gail Hewton leads the biggest sitting dance class in Noosa.



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Seniors join in the dance.