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Life

The power of dance

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Susan Slotnick is a most talented individual. A New Paltz resident, mother, grandmother, choreographer, painter, former talk-show radio host and writer.

Her repertoire would make anyone tire with her demanding schedule, yet she has a constant flow of creative juices running through her veins.

Holding a degree in arts education from the State University of New York at New Paltz, Slotnick has also studied the Horton technique at Manhattan's Alvin Ailey Dance Center, as well as modern dance with Brenda Bufalino at the Clark Center for Performing Arts in Ulster County.

She's taught touring dance groups, was an artist-in-residence at more than 20 public elementary and middle schools, and is director/choreographer of "FiguresinFlight Youth Dance Company," chosen to perform in the prestigious Battery Dance Festival in New York City for four consecutive years.

Slotnick has also appeared on the Phil Donahue, Sally Jesse Raphael, Richard Bey and Attitudes shows, along with having her own talk show on radio station WKNY called "Women of the Nineties." In addition, Slotnick is an acclaimed painter whose work has been shown at the Mark Gruber Gallery and the Unison Arts and Learning Center — with her "Compassionate Baby" painting adorning the waiting room walls of Manhattan's Sloan-Kettering Memorial Cancer Hospital.

Most recently, she's organized a dance class, bringing her choreography to an older set of people — as she believes "dancing is not just for the young and those with perfect bodies."

"People need to dance their entire lifetime — especially older people where dance has been medically proven to increase the 'feel-good' chemicals in the brain without the pills."

Her adult dance classes, taught at High Meadows School on Tuesdays at 7 p.m., have energetic and happy participants from ages 45 to 83 and who sometimes participate in her FiguresinFlight recitals.

However, the one venture Slotnick said she feels most passionate about is her work with Rehabilitation through the Arts, a program founded and directed by Katherine Vockins in 1996 at Ossining's Sing Sing Correctional Facility. Created as a solution for the coast-to-coast cutbacks in rehabilitation programs for incarcerated individuals, this ground-breaking program now operates in five men's and women's maximum and medium security prisons in New York state. It is also the lead program of the parent organization, "Prison Communities International."

Rehabilitation through the Arts perfectly fit Slotnick's desires to branch out and donate her talents and has proved to be

the seed that's cultivated incredible results locally. It's also said to possibly be the only program of its type around the globe.

To develop her skills working with the prison population further, she studied the "philosophy of attention" at Discovery Institute in New Paltz. In addition, she did much research, inspiring her to recognize how an inmate dance program would provide benefits on both an emotional and physical level for those incarcerated.

Rehabilitation through the Arts provides not only dance and expressive movement, but incorporates creative arts workshops in improvisational/technical theater, visual arts, voice, poetry and playwriting that offshoots to workshops and full-scale productions. These activities have proven successful in helping inmates develop communication skills and collaboration, as well as enhance goal and problem solving.

Even in the harsh environment of prison life, Slotnick said these measures help amplify the skills for external expression, trust and camaraderie — which helps re-entry into the "free" world. This philosophy impelled her to pitch the idea to local correctional facilities even though most contacted thought it "laughable," she said.

However, a Highland juvenile correctional facility found Slotnick's initiative appealing and ran the program for five years. Wishing to continue the program in other venues, she met with Vockins and suggested that Woodbourne Men's Correctional Facility, a medium-security prison, would be a good fit.

It was and remains so. In the past half-decade, like clockwork, Slotnick has entered prisons weekly to conduct a five-hour modern dance program — the only one of its kind in the nation.

Her dedication has not gone unnoticed. Last March The Huffington Post described Slotnick as one of the "Greatest Women of the Day," in recognition of Women's History Month. Her efforts were much-admired in Dance Magazine, whose Web site stated: "The article recognizes the dedication of Susan and her colleague, Bethany Wootan, and speaks to the power of the arts to uplift and transform."

"In college, I realized I wanted to give others, who felt trapped and alone, the freedom and joy that dancing gave to me," Slotnick said in the Dance Magazine article.

The reason she said she feels the program is such a success is because, in her words, "They (inmates) need to express emotions through their bodies rather than words, and I did this beautiful piece where the prisoners reenacted their street crimes in slow motion, which ended in them treating each other with love and compassion."

She added that many of the men she works with come from environments where dance is a major part of their culture and use the movement as an expression. As a result, it was not surprising her classes were well-attended from the start. However, it took time to gain the trust of the men she worked with.

"I had to earn it (trust) by continually coming back; week after week," she said, adding that her continued presence helped students recognize that she did this out of selflessness — not selfishness.

"It created a greater understanding, a tight bond, and appreciation of my true objective."

Last May, Slotnick brought a "one-time" screening of a special documentary of her dance program at Woodbourne, titled "Our Reflection of our Lives through Dance". The film, which was written by program participants and directed by Rehabilitation through the Arts' Arin Arbus, was shown at The Rosendale Theatre. Slotnick also had her youth company from FiguresinFlight perform inspirational dances that both she and assistant, Bethany Wootan, choreographed for the event.

Andre Noel, a former inmate, said, "Meeting Susan and Bethany ... was one of the most memorable moments in my life. It is through through (them) I discovered my passion for dancing." That eventually led to him teaching dance to at-risk youngsters in hiw own neighborhood, he added.

Slotnick continues to passionately work with Rehabilitation through the Arts. "If they aren't free, at least they should be able to feel free," she said.

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