

# Community programme gets seniors to dance their way to better health



Ms Nureen Abdul Aziz (centre), 21, a third-year student at NUS Nursing, with fellow student trainers Ashley Ng and Shyann Loh (seated, behind her) guiding seniors at the launch of a large-scale inter-generational community dance programme by NUS Nursing and Lions Befrienders on Sept 30. ST PHOTOS: BRIAN TEO

## Inter-generational initiative aims to boost physical health, cognition and well-being

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Retired precision machinist Rubiah Rahim joined a new inter-generational community dance programme at Lions Befrienders six weeks ago.

Since then, the pain in her left leg that she suffers as a result of sciatica has reduced, said the 69-year-old who enjoys dancing.

“The best part is we get to add in our own dance steps,” she added.

The inter-generational community dance programme is a structured 12-week initiative for pre-frail and mildly frail older adults. It combines movement, rhythm and storytelling to improve physical health, stimulate cognition and foster emotional well-being.

It is jointly run by the Alice Lee Centre for Nursing Studies at the NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine and Lions Befrienders, and co-designed with geriatric and exercise experts, dance professionals, student instructors, seniors and active ageing centre (AAC) staff.

Currently running at four centres, the programme will be rolled out at 10 Lions Befrienders AACs from 2025 to 2027. It is expected to benefit more than 280 seniors, in line with Healthier SG and Age Well SG, which prioritises preventive, community-based care.

The NUS Nursing and Medicine team plans to extend the programme islandwide to the more than 200 AACs, as well as develop digital training modules to complement in-person sessions and enable wider adoption by community partners.

“The long-term vision is to integrate community dance into Singa-

pore’s fall-prevention and ageing strategies, making dance-based interventions accessible to seniors nationwide,” said NUS Nursing Assistant Professor Vivien Wu, who is the programme’s principal investigator.

Dr Wu said mild cognitive impairment (MCI) affects up to 20 per cent of older adults worldwide. If left untreated, nearly 40 per cent of those with MCI may progress to dementia.

Dance improves cognition, neuroplasticity, mobility and quality of life in older adults with MCI, she added.

While normal exercise can seem dry and repetitive, dance comes with music and rhythm, and brings joy to the seniors, she told The Straits Times on Sept 29, ahead of International Day of Older Persons on Oct 1.

Ms Rubiah also connected with the young dance instructors and other seniors in the programme, including Mr Leonard Lee, her long-lost classmate from Jurong Vocational Institute more than 40 years ago.

Mr Lee, who was an assistant manager with Nanyang Technological University before he retired in 2018, said he suffered from knee pain and calcaneal spur on his left ankle. The pain in both areas has eased since he started dancing twice a week, with each session lasting about an hour.

The 68-year-old said: “The stretching helps, and my young trainers are so enthusiastic in motivating me.”

He and Ms Rubiah get to choose their favourite piece of music too. For both of them, their go-to dance track is Apt by Blackpink’s Rose and Bruno Mars.

Each weekly session lasts about



Student trainers Ashley Ng (second from right), 23, a fourth-year NUS Law student, and Shyann Loh, 20, a third-year NUS Science student, guiding seniors (from left) Chan Kok Kwong, 79, Leonard Lee, 68, and Rubiah Rahim, 69.

**The benefits of dancing are backed by more than four years of research by NUS Nursing and its partners.**

60 to 75 minutes and typically includes warm-up exercises to improve mobility and balance. The choreographed dance routines are based on simple, repetitive steps with themes such as nature, travel or daily life, to make the sessions engaging and relatable.

Participants end the session with cool-down stretches to aid recovery and relaxation.

The programme is led by Nation-

al University of Singapore (NUS) students who trained as dance instructors through a “dancing communities” course. These students are supported by research and AAC staff and guided by professional dance instructors.

The benefits of dancing are backed by more than four years of research by NUS Nursing and its partners. This included a pilot trial conducted in 2022 at four neigh-

bourhood senior activity centres operated by Lions Befrienders, where an eight-week programme improved seniors’ physical health, sharpened their memory and lifted their mood.

The research found that the seniors showed improved flexibility, reduced back pain and better stamina, with some seeing weight loss and lower blood pressure and glucose levels. They also had improved memory, attention and alertness from learning the dance choreography.

Dancing in a group also reduced isolation and built friendships. Through inter-generational exchange, the student trainers developed empathy and communication skills, while the seniors valued their energy and encouragement.

Ms Lauren Leow, a first-year business administration undergraduate, is one of 20 NUS student dance trainers.

“At first, language seemed a challenge as we don’t speak dialects,” said the 20-year-old. “But we came to realise that our movements can bridge the gap.”

Dr Chew Suyin, senior lecturer from NUS College and Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music, said movement is a universal language that transcends boundaries and breaks down the barriers in communication.

“Dance has a positive impact on the moods of everyone involved – whether they are facilitators, instructors, participants or the audience,” she said.

Ms Alina Tay, 22, a Year 4 psychology undergraduate, said the student trainers learnt how to progress from performing for an audience to facilitating and co-creating dance with the community.

To keep seniors engaged, the students introduced ball games as ice-breakers and simple gestures like high-fives to show encouragement, said Mr Kevin Tan, 24, a Year 4 business administration undergraduate.

Lions Befrienders executive director Karen Wee said social connection and engagement are just as vital as physical activity for the well-being of seniors, and the inter-generational community dance programme embodies this belief.

“This programme is more than just dance. It’s also about reducing isolation, building friendships, and creating a sense of joy and community,” she added.

“Together, we are not only delivering a beneficial service but also building a stronger, more inclusive community that supports our seniors in their journey of healthy ageing.”

She added that to attract more male participants, who make up about 15 per cent of the dance participants so far, the seniors can be encouraged to co-create and incorporate more masculine dance moves.

“Dance is like a gift everyone is born with,” Mr Tan said. “I like this idea of bringing dance to the seniors, who may think that they can’t do it any more.”

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