

# Community Dance Works Wonders for Veterans with PTSD and Brain Injuries

by Deborah Denenfeld and Jean Borger



John Nation

*“They had a great time and I did, too. It’s been 12 years for Brandon with his brain trauma and ten for Jeff [not their real names]. I found Jeff living on the streets, and we took him in about three years ago. I have tried all sorts of things to see them smile—last night was the first unforced smiles I’ve seen from both of them. They’ve already thanked me numerous times and called today to make sure we can come again tomorrow. Thank you with all my heart for what you are doing for these veterans and their families!”*

The comment above is from a mother who brought her son and his roommate to the first Dancing Well dance series held in Louisville earlier this year. It highlights for me so many important things that I need to keep in mind as I do this work—from the difficult circumstances faced by veterans living with PTSD and traumatic brain injuries, to the remarkable transformation dance can bring to these individuals, to their heartfelt gratitude at being

given the opportunity to dance and socialize in this uniquely supportive environment.

“I smile from the time I get here until the time I leave,” writes one veteran participant with PTSD. “This dancing and the people here are a blessing.” His wife agrees: “It’s like he’s part of something. He belongs. I haven’t seen him smile this much in probably a few years.” His young son says simply, “I wish we could do this every day.”

We all know that dance changes lives, but sometimes that change is nothing short of remarkable. Over and over again, participants, initially tense and unsure of themselves, talked about how much fun they were having, how they couldn’t stop smiling, how they looked forward to each session.

Like the afflicted soldiers who participated in the dance series held at Fort Knox in 2010, the Louisville veterans reported remarkable benefits—from improved mood, memory, sleep and outlook on the future, to decreased anxiety and physical pain

levels. One veteran spoke directly about thoughts of suicide: “I know now that I’m not going to kill myself. I may think about it, I may feel like it, but I’m not going to do it...I now see I can get beyond those feelings.”

For myself, I felt humbled and blessed to be a part of such a positive and powerful experience for these men and women who have been through so much. I can’t say enough about the many Dancing Well supporters, donors and advocates who allowed the series to take place—you all are my heroes, and I am thrilled to be doing this work with your support and encouragement.

I also want to thank the Country Dance and Song Society on behalf of all the veterans and family members who participated. While Dancing Well must secure its own funding, CDSS serves as our fiscal sponsor, providing us with tax exempt nonprofit status.

I’d also like to give a huge shout-out to the dedicated volunteers without whom the Louisville series would not have been possible. We all know that our dance communities are full of incredibly generous people who care deeply about others, but sometimes we get the chance to see that caring in action.

Over the course of the series, we were supported by almost fifty volunteers from local dance communities who came and danced, made reminder phone calls, provided transportation, prepared and served refreshments, organized child care, distributed recruitment literature, and served as “buddies” to veterans who needed extra encouragement to feel comfortable participating.

Of the ten veterans who danced with us—in the ten-session series and the much-anticipated “reunion” dance that followed—seven had PTSD and three, traumatic brain injuries. Four of the vets were women. One spouse, one mother and four children also attended, either regularly or stopping in for a dance or two.

Each dance session lasted an hour and a half and included live music. I led traditional family dances and encouraged participants to mingle and reach out to each other. I reminded them to listen to their own bodies, modifying dance moves as needed to respect the physical injuries that so often accompany PTSD. This structured, supportive environment allowed veterans to set aside their cares and experience the powerful benefits of community, socialization and safe physical activity.

As one volunteer put it, “Even in the brief time I’ve known these people, they seem to be so much more comfortable in their skin. That’s something I’ve learned from contra dancing, and it’s nice to see that reflected in other people’s faces.”

Participants in Louisville repeatedly asked that the series be continued—they felt that the dancing had changed their lives for the better and they didn’t want it to stop. As a result, we are now working to raise funds and develop a structure for a permanent Louisville series before developing a comprehensive curriculum and taking Dancing Well on the road to serve other cities.

Here’s to spreading the power and many benefits of dance to an ever-widening community. On behalf of all our Dancing Well participants, thank you again!

*Deborah Denenfeld is the founder and Executive Director of Dancing Well: The Soldier Project and can be reached through [DancingWell.org](http://DancingWell.org). Jean Borger is a freelance writer and editor with a passion for dance and community arts programs; she can be reached at [jeanmarieborger@gmail.com](mailto:jeanmarieborger@gmail.com).*

*For the earlier history of Dancing Well, see Deborah’s article, “Traditional Dance for Soldiers with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder,” CDSS News, Summer 2011.*



Photos for this article by John Nation. Above: the Louisville dance series; right: caller and Dancing Well founder Deborah Denenfeld.