



DanceSyndrome was founded in 2009 by Jen Blackwell, with help from her parents. Jen has Down's syndrome and after attending a mainstream school she felt that her disability shouldn't stop her from having the career of her choice. She wanted to be a community dance leader but found it very difficult to find training that was appropriate for someone with a learning disability. After 10 years of searching unsuccessfully, she took matters into her own hands and started DanceSyndrome to allow her, and other people in the same situation, to follow their dreams of having a career in dance. That was 13 years ago and DanceSyndrome still stands apart from other dance sessions with all activities being co-led by people with disabilities, who are all trained through DanceSyndrome's own unique Dance By Example leadership training course. This inclusive approach to dance delivery benefits the health and wellbeing of everyone involved. The Dance Leaders are empowered to become leaders, the professional Dance Artists who they co-lead with are inspired to see new perspectives and new ways of working in dance and the participants who join in every week learn new life skills in addition to new dance techniques.

Here we meet Jen, a NAPA Ambassador and winner of the Inclusion Award at the 2021 NAPA Awards.

How do you feel to have been able to help so many people with your charity?

I am very proud of what DanceSyndrome has achieved. I started this charity to help other people like me who couldn't access opportunities in dance because they had a learning disability. I always feel so proud when I see my friends living a life in dance because I know that my charity has helped them to follow their dreams. Without DanceSyndrome, people might still be lonely and feeling lost, like I did before I started the charity.



Who has helped you to achieve the success you've enjoyed?

I started DanceSyndrome 13 years ago with the support of my mum and dad, I couldn't have done it without their support. At first, there weren't many people but it grew because we worked so hard, and then there were a lot of people like me, I call them my dancing family because we support each other so much. The Dance Artists that work with DanceSyndrome are amazing, especially Donna Wheeldon who is my best mate and goes everywhere with me. My best friend Becky Rich has also helped me a lot. We go to lots of events together and she loves to tell everyone about DanceSyndrome as much as do.



How do you feel about the sessions having gone worldwide on Zoom (South Africa and USA)?

I am so excited that DanceSyndrome is going global! It has always been my dream that DanceSyndrome would go around the whole world so this is my dream come true! It's awesome!

Why dance? How does dancing make you feel and why do you think it's of such benefit?

I was always, always dancing as a child. And always full of beans and overexcited, dancing helps me to focus that energy. When I'm dancing I'm in another world and everything else just disappears. It's an amazing feeling. Dancing has so many benefits for your health and wellbeing, everyone should try it! Dance is brilliant because you can just put music on and start dancing anywhere! That's the first step. Then you can find out what style of dance you like because there are so many, you can do street dance or ballet or ballroom, there's something for everyone. And then you have to believe in yourself, because everyone can achieve if you believe you can. Dream, believe, achieve is my favourite motto!



Do you like the online dance sessions, or would you prefer to go back to just doing the sessions face-to-face?

We restarted face to face dancing in July and it feels incredible to be back inside Community Centres with my dancing family in our old routine. I feel very excited and very happy to be back there. We are still dancing on Zoom too. Dancing online helped to keep everyone safe in the pandemic and we would have been lost without it. I lead Street Dance with Donna every week on Zoom and we still love to dance online. We just have twice as much dancing now!

Do you think there is an advantage to having the sessions led by someone with a disability?

I think that there are lots of benefits to having sessions that are led by people with disabilities. Everyone needs to see people that they identify with in leadership roles. When people with learning disabilities see me leading they believe that they can be leaders too and feel inspired. I won the Inspirational Woman of the Year Awards at the EVA in 2015 because people know it is important to have inspiring role models. DanceSyndrome is fully inclusive and we have people with and without disabilities working together, so people without disabilities can be empowered too. It is a unique model of dancing that is really important. People with learning disabilities need to be treated more equally in society and DanceSyndrome sets an example of how to do that, not just in dance.



To find out more about joining a DanceSyndrome session, in person or on Zoom, please visit www.dancesyndrome.co.uk/sessions

NAPA EVERY DAY