

Proof of concept

We started with a plan to conduct a “proof of concept.” We would run a 10-week program of ballroom dance lessons and develop a model that others could use. The period selected was April 26 to June 28, 2023.

Having partners is key

We began by lining up partners in this program. We believe having partners is key to making this work. We started this jointly with the local Lions Club, since the Lions are dedicated to issues related to vision. Dance Haddonfield already runs a weekly dance at Grace Church, a local Episcopalian Church. The Church allowed us to use their excellent floor space for free – the same space we use for our weekly Sunday evening dances. Dance Haddonfield also brought in another non-profit, Ballroom Dancing for a Better U, founded by dance teacher Gene LaPierre. Gene, who has his own studio and also teaches dance at Rowan University, specializes in dancing for those with disabilities. He had experience in teaching ballroom dance to groups of visually impaired people. Haddonfield Lions already had contact with a major employer of the visually impaired, Bestwork Industries for the Blind, in Cherry Hill. They actively assisted in recruiting potential dancers. With their support we started with enough dancers to make the program worthwhile.

How the dance lesson program worked

The program was held on Wednesday evenings, with the lessons from 5:30 to 6:15 pm; we found this to be an appropriate amount of time for people who were new to ballroom dance. Bestwork Industries workers were done work by 4:30, so the timing matched their availability. Based on discussions at Bestwork Industries and their employees' working hours, we concluded it was wise to include a meal before the dance. Since we already had an excellent provider, a local Chinese restaurant, China King, we bought food from them and had it delivered each Wednesday. We also elected to run this 10-week test for free. Neither the instructor nor the church charged us for the 10 weeks. We determined that for future purposes, however, it would be viable to charge \$10 for each session. Without soliciting donations to fund this program we received donations from 3 dancers who had heard about our program, totaling \$1700; this was entrusted to the Haddonfield Lions Club Foundation.

We concluded that the approach we tested does work. The visually impaired participants were introduced to a number of dances and learned steps in each of those dances. Most importantly, they clearly enjoyed the experience, learned how to do some dances, and had a fun time. Seeing smiles on the faces of those who may never thought this was possible was worth any bit of work that this takes.

What comes after the first lesson series

After June 28 the program will have a summer break and resume September 13. The dancers will be welcome to participate in our regular Sunday night dances, including over the summer. Dance Haddonfield cannot guarantee transportation, but board members and volunteers will coordinate with and assist any visually impaired dancer who wants to try this.

Transportation was the biggest issue

We knew that transportation would be a key issue for the visually impaired. While we initially thought that recruiting visually impaired dancers would be a challenge, our alliance with Bestwork Industries made this part relatively easy.

We quickly discovered that coordinating drivers and dancers was a major challenge. We needed to know who was coming and who needed a drive where. Initially this was a very tense process, only knowing at the last minute whether we had the volunteer drivers we needed. Over time, however, we had enough drivers to handle all the contingencies (people being away, some dancers changing arrangements, etc.) However, anyone developing such a program should first determine what online system/app might help with coordination and who would be willing to take on this task. We initially considered trying to develop an arrangement with other transportation sources, such as Lyft or Uber. However they did not respond to our inquiries, and the one time we tried this it did not work out.

Letting the dancers feel at home

Having the food was a definite plus. That does mean that the dancers need to arrive earlier so there is time to eat. It also involves finding out if there are food restrictions for the dancers. For the arrangements we were very fortunate that one of our board members, Diane Liakos, took care of all the details necessary for everyone to enjoy the food and also helped them to feel at home. She made sure that each one felt comfortable there.

Our first two dance lessons had 2-3 people which made it easier to develop our routines for the process, but by the 8th week we had 10 dancers plus two sighted spouses. We typically had 2 experienced dancers there; it helped the instructor to have these people interact with the dancers.

We also learned much about the etiquette and practice of a program for the blind. This included:

- A. Meeting visually-impaired participants upon their arrival at the dance location and allowing them to hold your arm or elbow, while leading them slowly to and from their chair or lesson.
- B. Providing a safe environment and eliminating tripping hazards for all dancers, in order to reduce any risk of injury.
- C. Providing assistance to, from, and in the bathroom initially and as necessary.
- D. For some participants providing door-to-door guidance when picked up or after being driven home.
- E. Offering assistance during meal/snack time with food and beverages.

Having visually impaired and sighted dancers

We learned that it was helpful to have the lessons not just for the blind but also the visually impaired. With a group of blind dancers it is necessary to have people who can guide them to the facilities, such as finding the room where the dance is held, arranging/positioning their food and drink, and helping with the rest rooms. On the other hand, we believed that visually impaired people should not be given the sense that they could only dance with sighted people, so we did not try to match the visually impaired dancers with sighted dancers. The exception would be smooth or moving dances where a sighted partner would be necessary to avoid collisions. But for most of the dances, which are spot dances, the dancers each stay in a relatively contained location and do not need visual guidance. In our lessons we did not attempt moving dances.

Funding going forward

Going forward we plan to provide some compensation for the dance instructor but to be paid to the nonprofit, Ballroom Dancing for a Better U. We also want to continue the food. So we will consider funding sources.

Workshops for other dance instructors

We never want to turn away a blind person who asks about dance lessons, even when our class is full. Working with our instructor, Gene, we plan to offer a workshop for other dance instructors on how to teach ballroom dance to the visually impaired. In a sense there are 3 elements to this:

- 1) how to teach dance to individual visually impaired people;
- 2) how to teach dance to groups of visually impaired people; and
- 3) how to arrange and run a program for teaching dance to groups of visually impaired people.

We should note that there are dance instructors whose means of teaching is simply to demonstrate steps, and have people watch this and imitate the step. Obviously for the blind the teaching has to involve oral communication and touch. We are satisfied from our program that this is a viable approach.

Outreach

Based on our proof of concept, we now plan to do outreach to other Lions Clubs and dance organizations to follow our approach, so that the joy of dancing becomes available to more people with impaired vision. Dance Haddonfield has contacts with most dance studios and organizations in the tri-state area, and we are hoping that USA Dance shares this interest. We anticipate the Haddonfield Lions Club networking with other Lions Clubs. We would like to see the model we established be considered by others interested in helping the visually impaired to thrive, and to share the joy of ballroom dance with people who may not have considered it possible before.

If USA Dance is interested in this outreach effort, you might want to report on this in the national magazine.

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