

As a former principal dancer with the Houston Ballet and Broadway performer, Krissy Richmond understands that creative expression can lift the mind and soul. So it wasn't much of a leap for her to teach a dance class to those affected by Parkinson's disease.

Each Monday night, Richmond instructs individuals of all ages in "Dance for Parkinson's" at the Houston Ballet in partnership with Houston Area Parkinson's Society. Using chairs, she leads students and caregivers through a series of stretches and breathing exercises to help engage muscle movement.

Her return to Texas two and a half years ago was an elementary decision for the professional performer.

"I was done with doing eight shows a week and paying a lot of rent in New York City," says Richmond, who grew up in Beaumont and joined the Houston Ballet at age 17, where she stayed for more than 15 years before pursuing a national stage career. "I always felt incredibly lucky and made my living doing things I wanted to do. I was ready to give back. The ballet is an anchor to my previous life and it's my home."

Richmond says she doesn't have a personal connection to Parkinson's, but finds kindred spirits among her dance students, who also do plies at the barre, jazz combinations and sing theater songs.

"I've been a performer my whole life and have had to prove myself. I understand being the underdog," she says. "That's what those with Parkinson's have to do every day. Getting out of bed is a major accomplishment for them."

Though her students will never perform "Swan Lake," Richmond doesn't marginalize their medical challenges.

"I don't think of my students as having Parkinson's disease so I don't treat them any differently. They've been through enough. They've seen doctors, nurses and therapists. They are 'therapied' out. We just have fun, we sing and we dance."

The approach has left a lasting impression, on both students and the teacher.

"The effect is amazing. They feel safe, important and free," Richmond says. "It's a wonderful, giving atmosphere and I take no credit for it. They give to me as much as I give to them."

FREEDOM of expression

