

class actions

never going to learn it all, and you're never going to be as good as you want to be. So you just keep trying. That's what dance is all about."

Rather than focus on the perfection of a single move, Shriver prefers to focus on the improvement of each of her students, who range in age from their early 20s to 96. When she scolds, it's not because students aren't giving it their all, but because students have spoken negatively about their own ability and potential. Eye contact is often her primary tool when faced with "I can't" and "I couldn't."

A GENTLE TOUCH AND A GIFT FOR BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS THROUGH TRUST ARE AT THE CORE OF SHRIVER'S SUCCESS.

"Oh, but you *will*" is a phrase she commonly repeats when struggling students complain that correct execution is beyond their abilities. It is not unusual for an entire class to become involved in cheerleading as Shriver works with a student, one-on-one, until such defeatist attitudes are conquered.

According to Shriver, dancing requires a different type of thinking from people unused to regular physical activity. For adult students, coordination is a skill they actually have to think about. One student, a school teacher, tells Shriver that she wants to keep her mind active, and that dancing makes her mind work harder than anything else. Dancing re-establishes a mind-body connection that is broken when people spend long days just sitting and working at sedentary activities.

Shriver sees examples of how this connection can be reclaimed every day with her students. Their bodies just want to move, she explains. Some people walk into her class unable to touch their toes, or even bend slightly. They often can't touch their chins to their chests. Stiff backs and general bodily discomfort are common complaints.

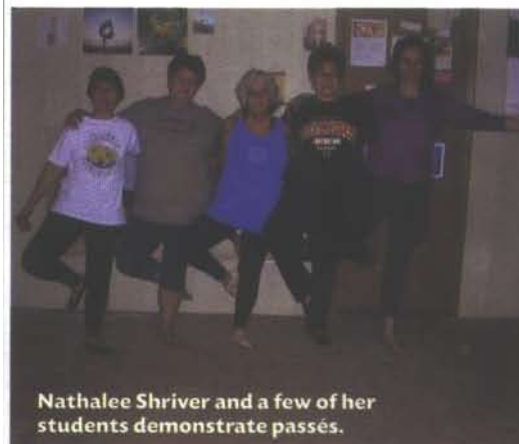
But after they start dancing, it doesn't take long to begin seeing improvement. "One way or other, they become flexible," Shriver says. "In my older students you can often see it in their walk. They feel the strength and flexibility return." She recounts how one elderly student left a class without her walker. "Not because she was forgetful," Shriver says. "She felt so strong when she left that she just didn't need it. She felt that good."

A gentle touch and a gift for building relationships through trust are at the core of Shriver's success. She tells of teaching ballet through a college outreach course; many of her students are wheelchair-bound or lack the confidence or balance to try new movements while standing. "If I call it ballet," she says, "they often frown and some will get giggly. But they will do it. They will do anything I ask them to do." She leads them through pliés, using the backs of their chairs for support. If they are tap dancing, but don't feel the confidence to stand, they just dance from their chairs. She has students who couldn't raise a leg and keep it up when they first began, yet now do so easily.

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Because students come to her with a desire to improve, Shriver sees no point in bringing a stern atmosphere to the classroom. She believes that students are artists, and that they are painting pictures of themselves. Her job is to provide guidance and encouragement. She believes firmly that succeeding is all in a person's outlook. "If you always see yourself sitting down, you won't get back up again," she says.

Aside from that, her classes are just plain fun. "We have a good time!" Shriver laughs, adding that another bonus is that with the type of dance she now teaches she gets to become part of the group as well as the leader. "We take the steps and we put them together. Everyone lets their hair down, laughing and giggling." It's a different world than the one her students participate in for much of their daily lives. It's a world of their own creation.



Nathalee Shriver and a few of her students demonstrate passés.

Shriver's schedule has her teaching an average of eight classes a day, and she always seems to be on the move, on and off the dance floor. She teaches from her home studio, at a local health club and at a community college. In addition, she volunteers at the local senior center. She says, "Somebody comes up to me and tells me, 'You know, they said I'd never be able to do this, and I'm doing it,' or 'My arthritis rarely bothers me now,' and I just stand in awe because this is what it's all about, getting better."

One of her students recently told her, "I had to wait until I was 82 years old to learn to dance, and I'm glad I learned." These are the lessons Shriver hopes to impart to her students. You are never too old to fulfill your dreams, and what better way than discovering the joy of dance? **DT**

Freelance writer Tracy Million Simmons' articles have appeared in House, Home & Garden, A Writing Parent and other publications.