

# Coda

## *Sharing Dance* with older adults during COVID-19

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### **Introduction**

As a tribute to the significance of the arts-based collaboration introduced in this book, in this Coda, we share additional stories of Canada's National Ballet School's (NBS) Sharing Dance Older Adults program from our perspective as leaders in innovative long-term residential care (LTRC) practice at *peopleCare*, a family-owned group of LTRC and retirement homes in Ontario, Canada. Specifically, we present the story of our organization's involvement in a subsequent expansion of the Sharing Dance program undertaken during the COVID-19 pandemic. In doing so, we hope to highlight the continuing importance of arts-based programs, such as those developed by NBS and their partners, and collaborative arts-based ageing research, such as that undertaken by the co-editors and contributing authors of this book, for improving the well-being of older adults living in LTRC and other congregate care settings in Canada and internationally.

### **A new partnership opportunity**

peopleCare Communities is a mission-driven, values-based, family-owned leading operator of communities for older adults, with a 50-year history of service and innovation in Ontario's publicly funded LTRC sector. We develop and operate campuses of care that enable older adults to age-in-place, with their care needs met over time in a range of housing options for older adults such as LTRC, independent or retirement living, and assisted care. More than building exceptional quality residences for older adults, our vision is to *Change the World of Senior Living*.

While partnerships have always been a peopleCare strength, our journey to support our residents, staff, families, and partners during the COVID-19 pandemic has taken us down some amazing paths. The particular story in this Coda begins in Summer 2020 when, amid Canada's first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, we were connected to the Director of Research and Health at NBS (book co-editor, Rachel Bar) through an introduction from our mutual partner at Trent University (book co-editor, Mark Skinner) with whom peopleCare had already established an exciting partnership to develop

a new LTRC home as part of Trent's University-Integrated Seniors Village. The team at NBS told us about an incredible dance program they had developed in partnership with Baycrest, called Sharing Dance. They asked whether peopleCare would be interested in piloting a virtual delivery version of the program's *In Your Seat* "Dance at Home" version in our homes.

As a family-owned organization with a long history of engagement and collaboration to foster meaningful experiences for residents, families, staff, partners, volunteers, students, and our communities, the opportunity to team up with NBS aligned with our values as an organization. We were also eager to help expand the Sharing Dance program beyond the original parameters of its evolution at NBS (so eloquently explained by Rachel Bar and John Dalrymple in Chapter 2) and the Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR)/Alzheimer Society of Canada *Improving Social Inclusion for People with Dementia and Carers through Sharing Dance* project that inspired this collaborative book, since bringing creativity, music, and the arts to our residents was in perfect alignment with peopleCare's ongoing commitment and goal during the COVID-19 pandemic to balance resident safety and care quality, without ever compromising the quality of life.

With the global pandemic declared on March 11, 2020, it was not long before statistics revealed the canary in the coal mine about the threat of the COVID-19 virus to LTRC residents, with hundreds of outbreaks and thousands of deaths. As a leading organization in care for older adults that cares for over 1,000 of Ontario's most vulnerable people in our LTRC and retirement homes annually, peopleCare quickly actioned a decisive response to protect our residents and frontline teams.

Early on in Canada's first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Province of Ontario took the unprecedented step of restricting visitors – including families – to create an "iron ring" of protection around LTRC. For our residents, families are that essential extra set of loving hands, eyes, and ears every day – a true caregiving partner with our teams. Having to stay away from our homes was heartbreaking. It also added to the sense of loss and isolation faced by residents who were used to the typical hustle and bustle of lively homes and the opportunity to spend time with their families, students, volunteers, and friends.

peopleCare wasted no time reaching out to Family Councils Ontario (an Ontario Ministry of Long-term Care funded non-profit association that works with residents' family, Family Councils, and home staff across the province to improve quality of life in LTRC) to talk about what they were hearing from families, how we could better support residents and their loved ones at this strange and challenging time, and what it might take to safely bring families back in LTRC homes. We were determined to honour and respect the meaningful role of families as our caregiving partners and maintain their trust and confidence. Most importantly, in alignment with our commitment to a relational approach to care, we wanted to keep residents and their families connected and engaged to mitigate any impacts of isolation on their mental health and well-being.

Informed by a consultation survey with family members of peopleCare LTRC residents, our initial strategies included virtual visits – practically unheard of prior to the pandemic. We also leveraged and strengthened our existing Facebook community of families and staff, creating an online social media campaign called #HeartfeltMoments, to share and celebrate the ways our teams, families, friends, and neighbours were supporting one another and ensuring our homes remained places of joy and resilience.

We wanted to do even more.

The peopleCare team was very excited about piloting the expansion of Sharing Dance in our homes, and what it could add to our residents' lives at this difficult time. Even the language used to describe the program was aspirational, offering residents a chance to play and express themselves through creative movement and music. It certainly felt like serendipity. The exact right thing we needed, at the exact right time, to bring a little joy into our residents' lives. We could not wait.

### **The who and how of the peopleCare pilot**

Matt Mullenweg, founder of WordPress, once famously said “Technology is best when it brings people together.” Sharing Dance at Home virtual pilot was something else altogether: an opportunity to bring the transformative power of creative movement, music, and artistic expression to our residents, in a safe and accessible way, during a pandemic no less.

In accordance with peopleCare ethics approval and informed consent protocols, beginning July 2020, residents and staff in two peopleCare LTRC homes and one retirement home began testing out NBS' streamed version of Sharing Dance. The six-week “at-home” pilot was similar to the streamed group programming they had been running before the pandemic but was shorter, offered as weekly 20-minute seated dance classes, taught by two NBS on-screen dance instructors (OSI) and accompanied by a live musician. Each new lesson built on the previous week and offered a different range of motion options to support inclusion and accessibility.

The details of how the pilot was run – for example, group sizes and whether offered in resident rooms or shared activity spaces – were different in every peopleCare Home, in part due to constantly changing directives and Public Health guidance that differed between jurisdictions.

Since peopleCare families would normally be invited to participate in this type of activity, in-person with their loved one in our homes, the flexibility of the online classes and that they were open to all was a tremendous benefit. The details and links were shared with families, with some taking part at home in the early days just for the fun of it. Our program leaders also worked to support family members to participate in a joint session with their loved one virtually, for example, through apps such as Skype and FaceTime, although uptake on this option was limited.

peopleCare residents and staff in these initial homes worked with NBS and the evaluators they employed to evaluate this version of the program. The

evaluation included both online surveys participants could fill out as well as phone interviews. Additionally, the evaluators ran a focus group with staff facilitators specifically from peopleCare as part of the evaluation. This informed improvements ahead of a broader roll-out of the program across peopleCare's seven LTRC and one retirement home.

To illuminate the importance and impact of the Sharing Dance pilot with peopleCare during COVID-19, in the section below, we describe the experiences of some of our team members and residents as they brought Sharing Dance into our LTRC homes in Summer and Fall 2020. With their informed consent, and in an effort to convey the authenticity of their experiences, we present the voices of our team members and residents' verbatim.

### **One home's experience**

Cassy Borth is the Director of Programs at peopleCare's Oakcrossing Long-Term Care home in London, Ontario. She was an early adopter of the Sharing Dance pilot with peopleCare, participated in the evaluation phase, and continues to see great value in what the program brings to residents, staff, and families.

During the 10 weeks of the pilot, we facilitated the dance program every Monday at 10 a.m. We had a group of about 15 men and women who looked forward to this weekly time. The videos worked really well for our residents. They are quick, only 20 minutes long, so whether someone has a cognitive impairment or dementia, the videos kept them completely engaged throughout. The music was also wonderful in keeping the residents engaged, it wasn't the same every week. Our residents truly loved it.

In the early days, when LTRC homes were closed to all visitors and families, the Oakcrossing team sent the link to families and friends of the residents several times, and more than a few family members enjoyed the shared virtual experience. Once the pilot was completed, Cassy ran the program intermittently for another nine months or so in groups of 5–15 people at a time, depending on the current pandemic restrictions.

### **Stories worth sharing**

To fully understand the positive impact that Sharing Dance had in our homes, we asked peopleCare's recreationists to share some stories from their experience in piloting the program. These particular stories from three different peopleCare homes stood out.

*“Irene” is in her late 70s and lives in a peopleCare LTRC home due to progressive dementia. Enthusiastic about art, oil painting and nature, Irene wrote novels when she was younger and reading remains a favourite pastime. Restless, often walking for hours on end, the restrictions of COVID-19 and not being outside or seeing her family were particularly hard on Irene. One day during the*

*Sharing Dance pilot, a recreation team member joined Irene on her walk, and accompanied her to the program area where a virtual dance class was in session. When Irene heard the music and saw the movement, she was instantly engaged. She loved the 50s and 60s beach party that was the day's theme, moving her arms and legs in time with the music. As the recreation staff describes it: "She was very involved, smiling, laughing and reminiscing. She walked away telling us how much she thoroughly enjoyed it. I'd say no doubt for her there was great value in this dance program."*

***We were a little surprised by the participation level of the men** – some originally would laugh and say "Heck no, I'm not dancing." Especially when they heard it was through a ballet school. We needed a different spin on things like telling them it was an exercise class with great music. Sometimes they came by just to see what the ladies were up to but then took part halfway through, once they saw what the program was like and that they would enjoy it. One of our gentlemen loves musical performances and singing and will come and listen to these types of programs but does not participate. He was 100% active during the dance program, tapping his toes, trying all the movements and really getting into the swing of things.*

***In the height of the COVID-19 lockdown, we decided to organize a Zoom call and invite families to join us for our virtual dance classes.** We had no expectations, we simply hoped families would see this as an opportunity to engage in a joint online activity with their loved one. We were thrilled by the response, with four or five family members joining each time. It was really great because although our families were not able to be in person with us – accompanying their loved one to programs in the Home like they would in "normal times" – everyone made the best of it, participating in the class at the same time and really enjoying themselves. One of the family members said, "Thank you so much for making the pandemic feel as normal as it can be." Another emailed afterwards to say how appreciative she was to see her mom interacting and smiling with other residents. The residents themselves were very impressed with this technology and left the class grinning ear to ear.*

## **What we learned, what we shared**

At the end of each of the two pilot phases, peopleCare worked with NBS to evaluate the expanded Sharing Dance program with the aim of making it more meaningful and impactful for participants.

The first opportunity to share peopleCare's experience of bringing Sharing Dance to our residents was through informal feedback provided by Jenn Kairies, former Director of Programs at peopleCare Tavistock Long-Term Care, who was the organization's lead and champion for this pilot. Below is a synopsis of what she shared with NBS on behalf of her peers:

Our residents are absolutely loving the program. It's simple, enjoyable and IPAC (infection prevention and control) friendly. The electronic delivery format offers us maximum flexibility – big screen, small screen,

it's easy to run in small groups or in an individual's room. Having the week's schedule posted for a good length of time helps us to run the classes when most convenient for residents. The only suggestion so far is that for our residents, many of whom have cognitive impairments, it's a bit difficult to follow along when there are two instructors, but otherwise, the program is great.

It should be noted that peopleCare's team members consistently found NBS to be extremely responsive and open to suggestions that would enhance the program for our residents. As a result of the feedback provided after the first phase of the pilot, NBS recorded new sessions for use in peopleCare homes that included only one instructor, doing one set of movements, accompanied by the pianist. This was much easier for residents to follow along with and supported greater engagement with the NBS on-screen instructor (OSI) (versus watching and mimicking their own, more familiar program staff in the Home).

After the second pilot phase, program directors and recreationists from four of peopleCare's eight homes – nine individuals in total from three LTRC and one retirement home – provided feedback during a video conference focus group. The purpose of the meeting was to understand the context in which different peopleCare staff and residents were using the Dance at Home videos and hear more about their experiences and the impact on various outcomes such as physical health, mood, and social connections. The focus group also served to help NBS further understand successes and challenges related to using the videos specifically in these settings.

NBS has commented that it was particularly touching to see one peopleCare team show up to the focus group in full personal protective equipment (PPE) – gowns, gloves, masks, and face shields – as they were battling a significant COVID-19 outbreak in the home. This was typical of peopleCare's dedicated frontline – stepping up with determination not to compromise our focus on changing care for older adults in LTRC or let COVID-19 get the better of them.

The focus group formed a small component of NBS' larger formal evaluation and report. Once again, NBS adapted the program based on feedback about accessibility considerations (i.e., different leg movements for participants in wheelchairs with foot pedals and a standing option to make the program more accessible to diverse bodies). peopleCare staff provided additional comments about the program saying:

The best part for our residents is that there was no right or wrong way to do it. And even a little participation goes a long way – they could get those arms and legs moving fully. Or they could sit and listen to and feel the music. Not to mention how it motivates residents. Unlike many physical activities that can tire them out quickly, residents were happy to keep going a bit longer because of the music. The sense of playfulness and fun were hugely important and made all the difference in keeping participants engaged.

A definite advantage of the Sharing Dance at Home program is the virtual aspect. Pre-recorded and posted on the internet for on-demand streaming or downloading, the flexibility to deliver the program using a computer, phone, or tablet, at any time, to any number of residents, in any size or configured setting, was a tremendous benefit to peopleCare's programs teams, who were determinedly leading through the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic with creativity and a can-do spirit.

For the purposes of the pilot, peopleCare focused on supporting, enhancing, and observing the experiences of our residents, staff, and families through their participation in the program.

### **The value of artistic expression and creative movement to our residents**

A big part of what makes peopleCare homes special is a focus on programs that offer social interaction, meaningful time and new relationships across the generations. A great example is our partnership with Western University to co-house music students in our retirement home. As Betty Anne Younker, past Dean of the Don Wright Faculty of Music, said about our partnership: "Stories are shared, life lessons offered and insights provided. The residents enjoy the vibrancy of the youth, the stories they tell and of course, the music that fills the spaces in which they gather."

An important benefit peopleCare saw from the Sharing Dance program is how it supported staff and resident engagement (an intergenerational interaction in itself). It allowed residents and staff to enjoy participating together versus the staff performing the program "or" the residents. As conveyed by Jenn Kairies, "Many laughs and jokes were shared as both the residents and the staff became more confident in the program and grew accustomed to the movements." Indeed, according to Jenn Kairies, from a recreation therapist's point of view, Sharing Dance offered multiple benefits consistent with holistic approaches to therapeutic recreation that support human flourishing (Anderson and Heyne, 2012). For instance, physically the pilot enabled safe and accessible creative movement, while supporting health and well-being. Emotionally, the pilot enabled residents to comfortably express thoughts and feelings in an inclusive atmosphere, promoting healthy expression of emotions and feelings of achievement, and building a sense of community. Cognitively, the pilot enabled residents to learn and function intellectually; it provided residents with the opportunity to practise decision-making and strategic thinking while implementing movements, and residents were able to watch, learn, and mimic the dancers. Socially the pilot enabled residents to enjoy meaningful relationships by providing an opportunity to engage socially with others, and it allowed sharing of thoughts and opinions. Finally, spiritually, the pilot enabled residents to find purpose in life, fostered creative expressions through purposeful movement, served as an inspiration to residents, and was offered in a non-threatening environment to promote self-expression.

## **Remembering the good times**

For older adults, reflecting on the past in a positive way can help maintain a sense of identity and self. Across our homes, staff commented on how strongly Sharing Dance supported reminiscing, and the boost in mind and spirit this gave to our residents. The music brought them back to another time in their lives, often a time of love and connectedness.

At a pilot session in one of our homes, a dozen plus residents joined in the fun of scooping ice cream, as the onscreen dance instructor encouraged them to recall childhood days of summer and their favourite flavour melting on their tongues. Music drifted down the hall where others sat tapping their toes with smiles on their faces.

Asked her thoughts afterwards, one participant enthused about the memories the music invoked of many former happy times dancing with a dear friend: “It brought tears to my eyes – that song was one that my friend and I would dance to all the time.”

## **Residents living with dementia**

According to the Ontario Long-Term Care Association, in their 2019 This is Long-Term Care Report, the proportion of LTRC residents living with dementia has been growing steadily since 2010, with two out of every three residents (64%) now affected by these diseases. And in fact, 90% of all LTRC residents have some form of cognitive impairment. Delivering resident-centred emotion-based care that connects to the person in an individualized and dignified way, supports the quality of life for each person living with dementia.

Many individuals living with dementia respond emotionally and physically to stressors in their environment with actions such as wandering, agitation, and anger. In several of our homes, the Sharing Dance program was seen as particularly beneficial to residents living with dementia. The simple movements were easy to follow, and the music was enjoyed by most. One Home noted they offered the program at various times in the day and found it assisted the residents in a soothing way, at times when their needs were higher:

The purposeful movement seemed to lessen their need to wander all the time. We would try it out at different times a day, at night it was calming. One resident I would bring when I was doing the program was quite agitated but would be calmer afterward.

## **Changing care for older adults**

When our residents speak positively about how it feels to experience life in a peopleCare Home, we know we are doing a good job. It is one of our most meaningful measures of success. During such a tough time – with isolation,



visitor restrictions, and the need for masks and social distancing – bringing Sharing Dance into our homes was a direct reflection of the determination of our frontline teams to keep as much fun, love, and laughter in our homes as possible: “Sharing Dance gave our residents something to socialize about. They were still talking about the session days after. And they get excited mid-week because the dance program is coming up again.”

During the COVID-19 pandemic, protective measures impacted residents’ emotional health and well-being, requiring a concerted effort on the part of LTRC teams to draw on their wellspring of creativity and resiliency to ensure safety while supporting quality of life. As the pandemic has progressed, measures have evolved. For example, the uninterrupted presence of family carers is now enshrined as a resident right under the legislation.

COVID-19 is expected to become endemic – with some variants circulating in society year-round. Pre-pandemic, outbreaks of various illnesses impacted homes, closing admissions, and requiring targeted infection prevention and control measures, including isolation of some residents. Regardless of the type of illness causing an outbreak, necessary enhanced measures will always run the risk of impacting resident quality of life for the duration. LTRC operators will need to continue to find innovative ways to keep residents active and engaged regardless of circumstances.

One of the greatest advantages of Sharing Dance at Home is the absolute ease with which it can be adapted and applied in terms of settings, times, group sizes, participants and more – all to better suit the unique needs of each LTRC resident or groups of residents.

Any time restrictions hamper our ability to provide recreation and activation, our homes can find opportunities to engage residents through Sharing Dance – in their rooms, in small groups in the activity spaces, with one staff supporting, with their loved one present or joining in on the screen. No matter where or when, the program’s music and dance have the power to transport anyone, anywhere – to a feeling, a time, or a place they want to be. The possibilities are endless.

### **Concluding comments**

peopleCare’s vision is to *Change the World of Senior Living* – in part by doing all we can to make the last chapter of our residents’ lives more engaging and rewarding. We appreciate NBS and their partners, including those who are part of this book, for supporting our dedicated frontline teams to fulfil their purpose and to bring the pleasure and benefits of creative movement into our residents’ lives at a time when it mattered so much. It was peopleCare’s immense pleasure to contribute our perspective of Sharing Dance during COVID-19 to this important book by sharing the experiences of our leaders, staff and residents in this Coda, in hopes that it encourages and inspires others to consider the many positive impacts of incorporating arts-based programs, and dance in particular, as well as collaborative research into their LTRC homes to bring more joy into their residents’ lives.

## **References**

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