

# Movement with meaning: Breast cancer survivors inspire benefit dance performance

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Eight dancers are in pain. One grabs her breast and shudders. Another focuses on her folded hands, turning them over and over as drums beat in the distance. A third punches the air. Yet they manage to come together, raising their arms in unison against an unseen foe.

This is the opening to "328-HOPE," the [Full Circle Dance Company](#)'s modern dance staging of a woman's battle against [breast cancer](#).

The company's founding director, Donna L. Jacobs, a [breast cancer](#) survivor, created the dance to benefit the [Baltimore City Cancer Program](#), a community-based initiative of the University of Maryland Marlene and Stewart Greenebaum Cancer Center that aims to reduce cancer deaths, especially those of the uninsured and underserved.

Full Circle will premiere "328-HOPE" (named for the program's telephone number) Saturday evening at the Chesapeake Arts Center in Brooklyn Park. The benefit concert, "Fight & Flight," includes dances created over the past decade for the company by local and national choreographers.

As with its past themed projects touching on faith, motherhood, race, clean water and even the fear of the unknown, Full Circle Dance Company invited the community to take part in its artistic exploration.

"We always like to look beyond our own circle for different perspectives," Jacobs said during a rehearsal in a studio at Clipper Mill, home of the Morton Street Dance Center that she opened in 1992.

"Our process involves sharing ideas, stories, feelings and often tears," she said. "When a subject really generates a lot of response, there is a strong possibility for a dance. We know we are embarking on a really difficult and important journey this time around. ... I am a **breast cancer** survivor."

Besides her dance background as a performer and teacher, her work in a medical setting gives Jacobs a perspective most cancer patients — and most choreographers — might not have. She serves as a senior vice president at the University of Maryland Medical System, where her work deals with government regulatory affairs and community health.

One of the area's most prolific dance producers, Jacobs could also be called a dance visionary, drawing her inspiration from her personal experience with the disease but mainly from the support she received during treatment. Before creating any choreography, Jacobs and company dancers twice visited a support circle that meets monthly at the Learning Center on the University of Maryland Medical Center campus.

Jacobs asked the survivors to share their stories. Some spoke about anger, others about the power of prayer. Some spoke about their fears, sources of comfort, and how cancer affected their bodies. Jacobs and the dancers then tried to convey the survivors' messages through movement.

"That was the best session we ever had," said Linda Adamson, a Baltimore resident and **breast cancer** patient who witnessed the evolution of the dance. "I could see pain and stress in their dancing, and with my chemotherapy, I could identify with how their bodies broke down. I don't tell my family members how I really feel, but these dancers were able to accomplish this with their dancing."

Breast cancer survivor Beth Schaefer, an administrative assistant for the Baltimore City Cancer Program, also participated in the support circle. "I felt the warmth and love from these dancers," she said. "Donna Jacobs would put on music and they would improvise. I cried."

Dr. Kevin Cullen, director of the Greenebaum Cancer Center, supported Jacobs during her treatment and encouraged her to create the piece. He commended the dancers for their dedication to this project and, especially, the **breast cancer** survivors for their bravery.

"This event honors the staff and women we serve," he said.

Rhonda M. Silva, division administrator for the Baltimore City Cancer Program, added, "What was special to me was to see the powerful emotions of the dancers who performed at the Learning Center. I am not a cancer survivor, but I can now understand that walk they have taken."

Perhaps Liz Pelton, one of the dancers who visited the support circle, summed it up best: "I left this room thinking that was the most important dancing I had ever done."

Jacobs and the Full Circle dancers have created an honest, gut-wrenching work.

Full Circle's Hope Byers, a dancer and choreographer, captures attention with her first entrance in "328-HOPE." She slithers across the stage, then pushes through space as if propelled by an unknown force. Her technique and presence clearly indicate she will not be defeated.

Just before the curtain in this 14-minute work, Jacobs joins her dancers onstage. She is wearing black, accented by a bright pink scarf that she uses to wrap the dancers closest to her. She acts as a guardian angel, maybe, but also a survivor.

"Creating '328-HOPE' was such an awesome responsibility," the director said. "Telling the stories of so many journeys through anguish, pain, suffering and triumph cannot be taken lightly. Heightening awareness of the struggle is key, but if a single woman finds comfort or strength through this work, I will be pleased."

Among other dances in the program are Jacob's "Stone of Hope," inspired by the creation of the Martin Luther King Jr. monument in Washington; "Crash," an explosive duet by Allison Powell; "Angels Unawares," a signature work of the company by Travis Gatling, and his "Embodied," an ensemble work that celebrates the power of the human body.

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