

Lucas: Welcome to Bridge the Gap Podcast, this senior living podcast with Josh and Lucas. An excellent, fun show today. You were definitely going to lean into this, we went to welcome Vanessa Woods; she is the owner of Vitality Ballet and Vitality In Motion. Welcome to the program.

Vanessa: Thank you for having me.

Lucas: Vanessa, you know what? This is going to be a fascinating conversation and really, really fun. Josh and I, as our listeners know, we're super passionate about improving the lives of older adults and especially about changing the perception about what aging even is. And we love the fact that your background and your work today are directly in line with that. So tell our listeners what is Vitality In Motion.

Vanessa: Awesome. Yeah so, Vitality In Motion is an artistically inspired exercise program that uses dance to help engage and inspire older adults to exercise and to use their body in creative and new ways.

Lucas: So let's dig a little bit deeper than that. So I'm just sitting here thinking, okay, you know, there's a lot of activities that happen inside senior living. I mean, yes, everybody loves bingo. But you know, as a new age today, we're constantly looking for different ways for residents to engage and especially for health reasons, right. Wellness is a big factor in today's senior living. So now when I think about like an activity coordinator or this type of practice that you're doing, this isn't just some hobby for you. You're not like, hey, let's reach our arm out. Let's just do a couple of basic things. You are a legitimate pro at this. Tell us more about your background.

Vanessa: Yes, so I am a former professional ballet dancer. So my entire life has been devoted to ballet. I started dancing when I was five and by 10 years old, I had very firmly told my family that I was going to be a professional. They were very skeptical at the time, but I was very relentless, extremely competitive and worked my way up from a very young age to make it to a professional level as a ballet dancer. So I knew that once I kind of devoted my entire life to this, and it was just something that I'm just still continuously so passionate about. I wanted to find a way to bring dance to more of a diverse audience. So I started teaching this, as many dancers do to little tiny young children, you know, the five, six, seven year olds. And I love working with those young, early education, but it was actually a conversation with my mom who is a very experienced occupational therapist who works with a lot of older adults in her practice. And we talked about what are some ways to help engage and help inspire older adults to keep active because it's so hard as you get older. Because you want to sit more and maybe things are starting to hurt. And so we were trying to brainstorm ways that I could use my passion for dance and help bring that to another audience that can maybe help improve their life and their quality of life.

Josh: So Vanessa, Vitality In Motion, when I first heard about this and I heard about ballet, I immediately was trying to just figure out how in the world does this happen with older adults. And then it went to my communities and your traditional kind of senior care community, that population. And can you help our listeners understand how you make this happen with older adults and what you know, for those that

can't visualize that right now, that will connect with you later after the show and they'll fully understand it, but just kind of walk us through that.

Vanessa: Yeah, absolutely. Let me take you through what a class would be like because this is probably one of the biggest things when we were talking to activities directors and we're talking to administration at a community and we tell them what we do, they're scratching their head a little bit thinking, okay, well, my residents are not able to spin around and twirl across the room. And I promise you that is not the goal. That's not what we're doing. So we start in our class, everyone's in their chair, their wheelchair. Even our independent living communities, which we're tailoring our group to every single level. So whether it's memory care or assisted living, independent living, skilled nursing, we really want to make it accessible to the group that we're with, but we're going to have everyone start in their chair and we're going to talk through posture. And how would you sit like a ballet dancer and what does that involve? Because at the end of the day, it doesn't matter if you're a ballet dancer, we all need that posture for even better gait and better balance. So there's elements to that, that we're going to talk about the whole time you have beautiful music playing, and then we're starting to slowly warm up the body from the head, the shoulders, the arms, even down to the fingers and the dexterity of the movement of those joints, right? Even to play bingo, I always tell them, right, you need the dexterity in those joints to pick up the chips and things like that. So it all relates down to the everyday thing from holding our toothbrush. You know, if you have stiffness in your joints, it's going to be harder for you to utilize the correct motion that you need throughout your daily activities. So we try to relate everything from our ballet classes, back to our normal life while also giving you an escape to really move your body. So we'll start moving with our portabre; and a portabre, it's a ballet word for carriage of your arms. So there's five classical positions in ballet with your arms. And so we take them through these various heights of their arm movements. And with this, they're starting to now have to move their shoulders where we know shoulder impingement or rotator cuff injuries are really common as well. So we're teaching them how they can slowly and carefully, very smoothly move their body through these positions, and help to improve that range of motion. While at the same time, it's very calm. It's very adaptive and we'll tell them how they can change the positions. So they fit best for them. So we'll go through our arms will trickle down to getting to the feet, doing movements, the feet and ankles that ballet dancers would actually do in a ballet class to start warming up their joints because in classical ballet, your feet have to have a lot of movement for the plants are flexing on Dorsey flexion of your ankle. So we're working on that as well. So at the end of the day, once they finish their warm up, which lasts about 15 minutes, then we actually start taking them through the classical ballet bar. So we would start saying, okay, we're going to start a plie. Now a plie traditionally would be a bending and straightening of your knees, which we would do standing. But for us, we do it in our chair. So we have them taking their arms and their legs in and out, and everything is coordinated to the music. So every single thing we do in the entire class is coordinated and choreographed to music and it's changed every single class. So it's never the same. And that would be mimicking exactly what you would see in any classical ballet class, anywhere in the world. So it's fun because you're not just moving randomly. You're not just pumping your arms in and out and counting to the number 10, which there's nothing wrong with that either, but most communities are already doing that. So this is something a little bit different. You're actually having your brain forced to remember the pattern, dance it to the music, finish on the music, and then add all these little artistic elements at the same time. So your brain is really forced to think and so a lot of the research about dance for older adults is showing that actually cognitively it can have a really nice effect on the brain because it's really different and it's utilized in different parts of the brain than we would in normal life.

Josh: So I love that. Tell me, is this an in-person where you're physically or someone on your team is in the community? Is this a virtual experience? How does this work?

Vanessa: Yeah, so we're doing this now both ways. So we started off with the first, I guess nine years, , in person really in our community. We're expanding now to create some more solid locations so that we can really make this something that's a bigger thing and not just here in our community, we want to make sure that we're serving seniors everywhere. But we are now offering all of our classes virtually, so really keeping everyone safe. And we're now able to really bring these ballet classes everywhere. So we can do them on zoom, we have also pre recorded classes so that people can play them at any time. You know, every community is trying to struggle right now and figure out how we get our calendars together in and out of quarantine. So we're really working to make all of the virtual classes accessible. So people everywhere can do them.

Lucas: Josh, this is not just some little volunteer thing that's thrown together. I mean, Vanessa, you've really put a lot of thought into this. I can see the connection, what a beautiful connection between your mother being an occupational therapist and your experience as a professional ballet dancer. And I really felt for our listeners that are not watching this, Vanessa actually, she's walking us through some of these movements. Obviously you're a ballet dancer. It's just in your DNA. It's how you move. And so it's actually a really cool experience to even see, you know, participate a little bit in visualizing some of this in our interview, right Josh?

Josh: Absolutely, and I have some curiosities. I'm assuming you interact with probably, you've been doing this a long time, a lot of different types of communities, a lot of different ages of older adults, a lot of different frailties. One thing that's near and dear to all of our hearts, because it's so prolific in our industry is this idea of caring for people with different forms of dementias. Have you seen that it's still those residents that are struggling with memory impairments or with dementia, are they still able to participate and do they get the same benefits that someone that maybe is not having those types of impairments?

Vanessa: Yeah, that's a great question because we're seeing more and more of our communities are adding memory care into their community. And it's really important to us that we're adapting our programming to make them a part of this. And we have found a really, really positive response from bringing our ballet classes to our dementia patients and our Alzheimer's patients and our memory care. We adapt the programming so that we make the combinations less complicated, so less movements and more repetition so that it really gives them more time to hear the music, pair the music to that movement and just keep that movement going and find some kind of symmetry with everyone trying to move together. And we've really seen a lot of positive responses from the residents taking these programs and really we try to adapt it to the level. You know, there's a big spectrum for each community that we visit. So at the end of the class, one of the things that's very unique to our in-person classes is the dancer will actually get up and do a little performance for them at the end. So that has really been one of the big things, especially for our memory care. When all of a sudden they see someone stand up and start twirling around the room and kicking their leg up in the air. They really respond really powerfully to that, I think it's like such a visual experience to get to see someone dancing for them. So I

know that we've really been really impressed and inspired to see that they are still resonating with the movement pair to music through dancing.

Josh: Well, I want to pivot here a little bit because part of your background that really intrigues me, and if I get too personal with the questions you can just verbally smack me through our connection. But, you know I'm always intrigued by athletes that have performed at the level of professional athletes like you have. And I've gotten to know you a little bit in our prior conversations, your whole growing up; your world has revolved around dance, performance on the biggest stages in the U S for sure and maybe abroad, I don't know. But you had a specific incident that occurred where, you know pretty much, I guess it kind of sounded like it was just the light switch went off and you knew from that point at a very young age, you were not going to be able to do what you had been preparing and doing as your normal everyday life. And I would like to talk to you, like what was that moment like when you realized all of my normal life and routine of participating in Broadway and all these shows is changing. I'm going to use a passion that I have in a different way. I think that that moment that you had is so relevant to so many older adults that through living life and experiences and elements, they come to some point and whatever it is they have been physically doing, they come to that same moment that you had. So could you just take us to that moment, take our listeners so that maybe we could use that to encourage ourselves and our older adults. And when you come to those moments in life, like how do you pivot?

Vanessa: Yeah, absolutely. I think that what makes professional athletes, and I'm putting dancers into that category for this purpose, is that they discover their sense of purpose on this earth very early in life. So I had experienced that for myself, knowing that by the age of 10 years old, I was going to be a professional ballet dancer, there was no other option, that was it. And I was going to do everything I needed to, to make sure that I achieved that level. Then you audition for companies all over the country that like becomes your life, that you're auditioning and constantly looking for where you're going to dance your career, because it can end so quickly as a dancer. So, I develop this sense of purpose, really young. And then as I was about 30 years old, I got a very random foot injury. Basically it was right after the ballet Swan Lake. And it was just very sudden and very confusing. And I literally spent exactly 12 months recovering, like rehabbing very intensely, like doing everything on the floor and trying to keep everything in my body perfectly ready to jump back on stage. Like, I mean, I didn't even doubt for a second that I would just go back to dancing. So I had meantime started this company. I had already started Vitality In Motion and it was going on behind the scenes, but my dead-set focus, my purpose was to be dancing. So nothing was going to get in the way of that. And after basically rehabbing for a full year and just not seeing the foot being able to recover to the extent that I would need it to, I had to kind of make that tough decision that it was time to essentially in ballet, we call it retiring. So to retire from the stage and kind of turn my sights elsewhere and that's where I really worked for me to start taking my passion for what I had built. I had already started this on the side, so I was doing it in the background. I would be running into rehearsal for the Nutcracker and then run off stage, take off the tutu and like check my email and see if any of my communities had emailed me or if I had missed calls from any of the communities. So it was like wearing two hats. And I knew that once I had retired, it was kind of time to take that dancer hat off and see how I might be able to keep that passion and keep some of that core of who I am and all of the experience that I've built.

But how could I share that now with a different market and help to keep older adults finding their sense of purpose, even if it's not necessarily ballet or dancing, but really just finding intentional ways to keep your body and your mind active and healthy. And that's something we talk about a lot in my classes, the idea of moving with intention and moving with purpose. So even if you don't have experience with ballet or with dancing, and that's just something that maybe you feel very uncoordinated, we hear that a lot. But the idea is just moving your body with an intention and a purpose we're going to do this movement. Here's the goal and here's why we're doing it. And I think there's something I just, maybe it's my ballet background or something, but I like to be very goal-driven and this is why we're doing things. And I think that has served us well in the programs that when you take this class, you're going to feel a sense of purpose as well.

Josh: Gosh, I love that Lucas, living and moving intentionally with purpose. Very consistent with so much of what we talk about. I'm so glad that our listeners have gotten to learn a little bit about who you are today Vanessa and Vitality In Motion. I know that we are going to connect to you on a very large platform with hopefully a lot of new people that you've never got to meet before. Lucas, does this make you want to move?

Lucas: You know what, gosh, I'm motivated. I'm actually motivated and I'll be the first one to say, believe me, Lucas McCurdy needs to do a little bit more movement after being stuck in quarantine and pandemic world for so long, eating whatever I can find. So, no, I'm motivated by this. I think there's so many takeaways. Vanessa, you're an incredible communicator. You've got an amazing heart. What a great thing. I mean this checks all the boxes for me, Josh. I mean, this is changing the perception of what older adults are in an-do moving with purpose, it's fantastic. Before we let you go, Vanessa, I want to know in all of these interactions that you've had, have you actually come across some other retired, ballerinas or ballet dancers?

Vanessa: That's such a fun question because I have, it's so fun. It's like meeting a unicorn, it's so fun. So we have here in St. Louis, we have this outdoor theater, that's called the Muny and it's very famous, it's like a hundred years old. And so sometimes we'll be teaching a class and I can remember someone specifically in one of our memory care communities, and the caregiver brought her in and said, I just want you to know that she is a professional dancer and she danced with the Muny Opera. And so she's here in this, you know, pretty progressed memory care center. And as we start doing the portabla movements of our arms, she starts counting them out loud with me because we count them. You know, this is the first position, this is the second position, this is third. And then all of a sudden she starts counting them with me. You know, I'm in fourth and she's fourth and then fifth, it was amazing. So you get those moments of like getting chills that you're bringing these memories back or people that even just used to dance with their spouse and it's different kind of dancing, but they're thinking, oh, maybe we're swinging in our chair and they start swaying and singing along to the music or thinking about the memories that it inspires. It's amazing how dance can connect so many memories, even with the men. You know, my grandkids used to dance or my daughter used to dance and I used to love seeing her recitals every year and they want to talk about what they're experiencing at the end. They want to tell me about their dance experience or how they always wanted to dance. And so that's always really fun and really special.

Lucas: Oh man, that gave me goosebumps, just hearing that. I mean, it's incredible what experiences you've been able to create and still are creating. So last question; so what's your favorite Broadway show that you've ever performed in?

Vanessa: All right, so ballet is a little different than Broadway, because I have to say I'm a huge Broadway fan. So that's a little bit different in my mind, that's like Hamilton and Chicago and The Lion King, like those are like Les Misérables, but the ballets. So I would say probably so I'm a huge George Valjean fan. So I know that might be a little in the weeds, but that's from New York City ballet, one of the best companies in the entire world. I love all of his ballets, but I'll go with some of the classics. I love Romeo and Juliet. I love Jyzelle and I love the Nutcracker of course. And one more, I will say the ballet Coppelia. I think that was so beautiful. I know some of those are a little less known, but if you haven't seen them go on YouTube, they're amazing. And so fun.

Lucas: Josh. I've learned a lot today.

Josh: I'm Googling right now as well, because I admit my ignorance when it comes to ballet. Thank you for educating us though this morning Vanessa, your passion and enthusiasm is inspiring. Wishing you the best for sure.

Vanessa: Thank you so much. It's been such a pleasure to talk with you guys. I think you'd be amazing dancers.

Lucas: Oh yeah. We need to sign up for a class.

Vanessa: Okay, perfect. It's never too late. That's my Vitality Ballet, you can come join that. That's my adult ballet program. I will teach you everything you need to know.

Lucas: Okay. All right, as soon as Josh gets his tutu, I'll get mine.

Josh: Hey man, there might be one in the closet. You never know.

Lucas: I think that's a great ending point right there. We're going to make sure that we connect all of our listeners to Vanessa Woods and Vitality Ballet. And we're gonna put all that in the show notes. You can go to BTGvoice.com and access all of our programs. We'll also put the transcript to this, links to social media and the video broadcast of this episode. Vanessa, thanks again for being on our show and thanks to all of our listeners for listening to another great episode of Bridge the Gap.