

THE**R**APY EN POINTE

by Sarah Joyner

► IT'S A TUESDAY NIGHT and the studios at Chattanooga Ballet's location in North Chattanooga are brimming with dancers. Music trickles into the halls and the occasional instruction from a teacher can be heard clearly over the rhythm of feet on the floor. At the back of the building, in a small dance studio with a mirror-lined wall, the scene is different. Clusters of students in navy Polos or professional attire with UTC name tags mill about stations with medical treatment tables, chairs, step stools and tools for various ways of measuring the human body.

As the fall season for Chattanooga Ballet begins—and before rehearsals get too heated—third-year UTC physical therapy (PT) students, under the leadership of lecturer Julie Bage, have set up this studio space to provide pre-screening for Chattanooga Ballet dancers. The screening determines their physical strengths and weaknesses. With this knowledge, dancers and their instructors can plan rehearsals and build strength to improve the health and technique of each dancer.

A dancer clad in leotard and tights steps through the doors. She is directed to the first station, where she is instructed to step on and off a step stool for three minutes. The dancer keeps pace with a metronome's quick beat as her feet steadily step onto the stool and hit the floor over and over again. The station tests the dancers' cardio fitness. Their heart rate is checked before the exercise, right afterwards and once again following a minute of rest.

As more dancers enter the studio, they make their way through each station. UTC students stretch dancers' legs, have them balance with their eyes closed and measure the dancers' range of motion. "I think this is a really cool opportunity for us to pre-screen these ballerinas just to see: Are they predisposed to injury? The screening that we're doing is really specific to the strength and range of motion that dancers need to be successful in their careers," explains Chaney Sullivan, a third-year PT student. "So we can look at where they are lacking and determine if this will predispose them to injuries. We can give them recommendations on things to do to, hopefully, prevent injury as their career and as the season develops," Sullivan says.

Tonight is just the beginning of the interactions physical therapy students will be having with Chattanooga Ballet dancers. And from this first meeting, the dancers are already gaining valuable insights into their bodies and physical training. "I'm very excited to see all the results. In the ballet world, you train every day at barre and things like that, but I would love to know what I need to be doing outside of the studio to cross-train," explains Samantha Cole, professional dancer with the Chattanooga Ballet company.

Abigail Haynes, a dancer training with the ballet's professional company, says she's "never done anything like this." She adds, "I wish I would have been able to do more like this growing up. Hearing all the things that they're saying. Some of it, I knew that was going on. But other things I'm thinking, 'Oh, that's interesting. That might be why I'm doing this in the classroom or why this hurts at night.'"

Personal experience

Before she was a student at UTC, Elizabeth Harrison was a dancer. The 2016 graduate danced professionally with Nashville Ballet for three years, enduring a broken bone in her foot and hip surgery while part of the company. Both injuries required rehabilitation with physical therapy. "My injuries while dancing are a big reason I was led to physical therapy as a career," Harrison explains. "Dancers are athletes of a different sort. Rehabbing a dancer the same way you rehab a soccer player, for example, is not advantageous to the dancer/patient. With my knowledge of PT and dance, I wanted to blend the two to help people dance safer, smarter and longer," Harrison says.

Harrison began working as a dance medicine specialist with Nashville's Susan Underwood Physical Therapy after she graduated from UTC. The private outpatient physical therapy clinic treated her injuries when she danced with Nashville Ballet. Susan Underwood Physical Therapy is the official provider for ballet company dancers. The relationship between Nashville Ballet and Underwood is one that UTC's Department of Physical Therapy has used as a model while partnering with Chattanooga Ballet to treat dancers in the local community.

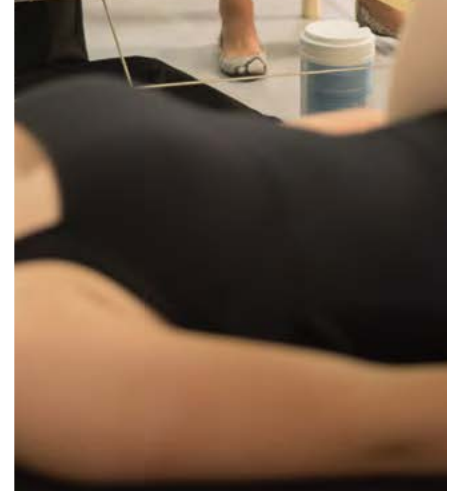
A few PT students participating in the program have backgrounds in dance; however, most knew very little about what goes into the athletic art. Physical therapist Bage is teaching the elective course. She danced professionally and has a background in treating dancers with physical therapy. This creative approach, says Bage, teaches students to think outside the box. Whenever they treat patients with unique situations or demands, students won't wilt under pressure. Instead, they'll rise to the challenge because they know how to take a step back and analyze the system and the movement to find a solution.

"They (the PT students) are looking at a very novel movement analysis model," explains Bage. "They're having to take all the nuts and bolts they've learned about a normal running gait or normal movement patterns and I've said, 'OK, let's take what you know and now let's turn everything on its ear. Turn it 90 degrees to the side and figure out now where the stress is. What muscles do we have to use to support that?'"

The UTC link

Andrew Parker joined Chattanooga Ballet as company artistic director last year. In the past, he worked with ballet companies that had partnerships with physical therapists similar to the relationship between Nashville Ballet and Susan Underwood Physical Therapy. He saw firsthand how partnering with physical therapists kept dancers healthy and improved their form. Parker knew that was something he wanted to bring with him to Chattanooga and recognized the resource UTC could be. “While injuries are unfortunate, they do happen in physical activities like ballet and sports,” Parker says. “We want to be ready to offer our dancers and our students support right away so that they can heal quickly and get back to what they love doing.”

Parker first approached Nancy Fell, UC Foundation professor of physical therapy, who brought Bage into the mix. For their first collaboration in 2016, Fell, Bage and a few volunteer students provided support to Chattanooga Ballet dancers during their December production of *The Nutcracker*. The therapists waited in the wings of the Tivoli Theater and assisted dancers during the rigorous performances. The relationship, Parker says, will be a win-win for all parties involved. He’s hoping this experience will be as fruitful for the PT students as he knows it is for the dancers. “These are the kind of partnerships that Chattanooga Ballet seeks out. We’ve done other partnerships with other places and organizations in town, but UTC and its Physical Therapy Department are high priorities for us. We look forward to strengthening the relationship in the coming seasons.” he says. **C**



Physical Therapy students work with Chattanooga Ballet performers.

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