

Dancers get therapeutic hand

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Volunteer physical therapy students join their professor to keep Tulsa Ballet dancers healthy.

Tulsa Ballet dancers line up every week for physical therapy sessions with Ken Randall and his students.

Usually, there's a waiting list.

Randall, an assistant professor of physical therapy at the University of Oklahoma-Tulsa, started as a volunteer four seasons ago and got hooked when the dancers kept asking, "Are you coming back?"

Now he spends lunchtime once a week stretching out the dancers' tight muscles and teaching them exercises to keep their bodies as pain-free as possible. He also is one of three physical therapists who gets paid to do physical therapy for the dancers during performances.

Barbie Reif, the ballet company's manager, quickly realized that with Randall came the possibility of student involvement.

Not only could the dancers get physical therapy, but OU-Tulsa students could get hands-on practice.

Between rehearsals for "The Nutcracker," third-year physical therapy student Jennifer Harmon showed Ashley Dangos of the corps de ballet how to lean at an angle against the wall and swing one leg, with knee bent, from side to side, stretching the calf muscles.

Dangos said she would rarely get to a physical therapist if she had to make an appointment at a clinic. But she comes just about every week to see Randall and the two students he brings.

Therapists often use their knowledge of muscles to invent stretches and exercises, Randall said. Volunteering at the Tulsa Ballet gives his students a chance to exercise their creativity.

"Physical therapy is definitely an art," Randall said.

Last week, third-year student Melissa Vann made tiny movements with her thumbs along a tiny section of the outside of Rupert Edwards' left thigh.

Edwards, also a member of the corps de ballet, quietly lay on a mauve padded table, enduring the stretching technique.

"It's pretty painful," he said.

Edwards has a hard time easing out the tightness himself because of the muscle's location. He and most other dancers commonly come in for the same therapy week after week.

"We jump all day across the room," he said, "and then you get tired and jump incorrectly."

Josh Trader, also in the corps de ballet, noticed when he came to Tulsa three seasons ago that the company took better care of its dancers than his previous company did.

While in that troupe, he said, he thought he broke his foot, but he kept dancing anyway. He admits not taking care of the problem was "stupid." When the same thing happened in Tulsa, he was immediately treated.

"Dancers have a tendency to just go, and they won't say anything because they're afraid they'll be pulled from the show," Trader said.

He sees some of that fear in Tulsa, too, but the predominant attitude is to take care of health problems early so they don't end dancers' seasons or careers, he said.

"It keeps your body going the way it needs to go," Trader said.

Reif said the service by Randall and the students saves the ballet company money in workers compensation claims, which dancers would otherwise have to file every time they were injured.

Instead of filling out workers comp paperwork, the dancers happily pop their heads in the door to the physical therapy room inside the converted school building that houses the ballet. They ask when Randall will be available and thank him for his help.

This fall, when Randall sent out an e-mail to his second- and third-year physical therapy students, about 120 students volunteered to help at the Tulsa Ballet.

Harmon and Vann have both volunteered during two performances and corresponding practices this fall. They appreciate the chance to perform therapy outside clinics, where they usually get their required practice, they said.

This is letting them work with patients who are healthy and athletic and who know their bodies well, Harmon said.

It also teaches them how to make dancers feel better quickly so they can continue performing, she said.

Although Randall said his students made physical therapy look easy, they said they were constantly learning from their professor.

"Even while he's working on dancers," Vann said, "he's teaching along the way."

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