

FEEL-GOOD FUNDRAISING

WANT TO TEACH YOUR DANCERS
TO PIROUETTE WITH PURPOSE?
GET INSPIRED BY THESE SUCCESSFUL DANCE FUNDRAISERS.

BY JEN JONES DONATELLI



Utah's Dance Impressions students perform to benefit a local children's hospital.

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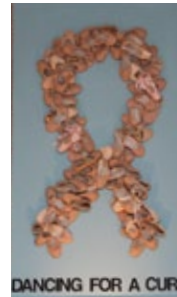
Ten-year-old patient Ashlyn Beynon tells her story onstage to Michael Babcock of Shriners Hospital.

What happens when you combine tap dancing, a good cause and eight spunky women who also happen to be breast cancer survivors? Think pink, aka the Pink Ribbon Tappers. The tap dancing group formed 12 years ago to raise money for the Backus Foundation. Their goal? To take the stage at the foundation's biannual Survivors in Fashion show. The one obstacle? Lack of tap dancing experience. "We didn't even have tap shoes," says Pink Ribbon Tapper Barbara Chiangi, a two-time breast cancer survivor who produces and directs the fashion show.

The determined group enlisted New London, CT-based tap teacher Louise Neistat to whip them into performing shape. Neistat refused to take any payment for teaching the women, and a beautiful collaboration was born. Several years ago, Neistat also invited them to perform at her own annual fundraiser, which also benefited the Backus Foundation. Since then, the two groups have raised tens of thousands of dollars for breast cancer research.

Neistat and the Pink Ribbon Tappers are just one of many examples of the amazing things that happen when dance and philanthropy meet. Here is how she and other dance teachers have successfully made a difference.

Photo by Missy Matthews, courtesy of Art with Heart



Founder Susan Mendoza Friedman (at center above), dancers and audience dedicate the performance to loved ones.

Dancing for a Cure

Hyannis, MA

Beneficiary: Friends of Dana-Farber Cancer Institute

Total Raised to Date: \$150,000

Dance Designs owner Susan Mendoza Friedman had already lost her father and a close friend to cancer when her best friend of 40 years, Karen Scheck, was diagnosed with ovarian cancer in 2005. At the time, three students' mothers were also undergoing cancer treatment. "I said, 'Enough—we need to do something,'" she says. That something became Dancing for a Cure, a holiday *Nutcracker* performance and variety show that Friedman has staged now for six years to raise money for cancer research.

Friedman, who had no fundraising experience, began by enlisting the help of dance moms and faculty. "After putting up a sign, people started coming out of the woodwork and it just snowballed," she says.

Putting the show together was also a unique challenge. "We'd never been a *Nutcracker* studio," she says. She decided to mix *Nutcracker* variations with dance production numbers, performances by musicians and "Storybook Speakers" willing to share their own experiences with cancer.

The formula worked. For the first three years, Friedman hosted the event at her studio with "100 folding chairs in a space that was roughly 17' x 6'—it felt intimate and magical." Today the show has expanded to a local high school

auditorium, with a cast of 80 to 100 dancers. Ticket prices are \$15 for adults and \$5 for children. The amount raised has also blossomed from \$7,000 in 2006 to \$38,000 in 2011.

Twenty volunteer committee chairs oversee everything from raffles to refreshments. Sponsorship is a major undertaking and accounts for 40 percent of total proceeds, with giving levels ranging from "Reverence" (\$100–\$249) to "Grand Jeté" (\$1,000 and up). Raffle and silent auction items are donated, as well as all production materials. "We have very low operating costs, because we beg, borrow and steal everything," laughs Friedman.

She is especially proud of the fact that 100 percent of money raised is donated to Friends of

Dana-Farber, with half going toward breast cancer research and the other half toward ovarian cancer research. "There are other for-profit *Nutcracker* performances on Cape Cod, so when I call for coverage in the paper, they'll say, 'There are so many *Nutcrackers*,' and I tell them, 'Nothing like this one,'" she says.

Not surprisingly, the show has a highly emotional component, with storytelling by survivors and dancing by alumni, who return to lend their talents in lyrical numbers. As a new component added last year, audience members and dancers held signs dedicated to individuals they wished to honor. "Cancer is so prevalent and the kids involved are well-aware of what they're dancing for," says Friedman. "It's all about hope, love and inspiration." **DT**

Jen Jones Donatelli is based in Los Angeles.