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## Manso de Sousa aims to create inclusive dance community at Southern Arc Dance Center

By Tamara Newell  
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Paulo Manso Manso de Sousa leads a game with students Heather Pampena and ZiXin Apecena to build gross motor skills and cognitive 1

On a Monday evening, 8-year-old ZiXin Apecena greets her dance teacher with a big smile and warm hug.

Peering through her glasses, she hands him a gift.

“For me? It’s not even my birthday!” says Paulo Manso de Sousa, artistic director at Southern Arc Dance, who teaches the little girl’s ballet class. With a giggle, ZiXin runs to her mom who sits nearby. After a quick hug, ZiXin joins her friend Heather Pampena in the dance studio for the Dance Without Limits class.

Dance Without Limits is a weekly, hour-long class for individuals ages 7 and older with physical and developmental disabilities.

“Dance should be inclusive,” Manso de Sousa said.

In addition to Dance without Limits, Manso de Sousa teaches a weekly class for those with Parkinsons, as well as another class to help people with balance and flexibility.

Dance for all

Increasing amounts of research shows that dance may have a profound impact on neuroplasticity despite age. For those living with physical and developmental disabilities, dance may provide improved cognition, alongside physical health and opportunities for social interaction.

A 2018 meta-analysis of multiple studies concluded that dance has a positive effect on the physical, cognitive and social development in children with disabilities. Additionally, dance may challenge gross motor memorization and coordination, stimulating brain boosting cognitive functions such as memory and concentration. The muscular control involved with dance may also strengthen balance skills, potentially reducing the risk of falls or injuries.

“We’re connecting our brain with our body,” said Manso de Sousa, who said he sees the positive healing impact on his students first-hand.

“The healing benefits of dance is really what’s important,” said Manso de Sousa. “It allows oxygen to go to the brain.”

According to the American Association of Neurological Surgeons, the frontal lobe of the brain is responsible for motor skills, speech, behavior and cognitive functions like memory and concentration. Several types of disabilities including autism, cerebral palsy and Down syndrome can impact development in these areas.

“Things don’t always connect,” said Manso de Sousa. “So the way I work is I always try to find what they can apply in their daily life not just as dancers, but how it can benefit their lives.”

During the class, Manso de Sousa guides the dancers through a wide variety of movements, beginning on the floor. He leads them through stretches, ankle circles and classical ballet arm movements called port de bras. They hop, twist, slide while learning to listen and move in sync to the music. Dancers also practice foundational mechanics like walking heel to toe.

Throughout the duration of class, Manso de Sousa teaches with kindness and patience. When a student makes a new connection in their body, his face lights up and so does theirs.

Will Slay, the operations manager at Southern Arc, said he enjoys watching each Dance Without Limits student grow over the years.

“I’m most proud of them seeing them transition into the traditional classes,” said Slay.

Louis Pampeña, Heather Pampeña's brother, is also a dancer at the center. He started out in the Dance Without Limits class, but has progressed into traditional classes. Louis is a jazz and hip hop dancer who says his favorite thing about dance is the music.

But Louis' dancing doesn't end when he steps outside the studio. In high school he was a member of the dance team. At Southern Arc, he along with many other dancers with disabilities perform in studio productions.

"They get to be a part of it," Slay said. "They're backstage with the big kids. It's all fun. We are blessed with some really great kids."

Manso de Sousa said cultivating an atmosphere of belonging has been important since the center's inception. He continues to study and learn from inclusive forerunners in the dance world like Alonzo King from Lines Ballet in San Francisco and Mark Morris in Brooklyn, New York. King and Morris bring dance education into their community through partnerships with local schools, adaptive and inclusive dance classes, and training dance professionals to teach students with disabilities.

Heather and ZiXin said their favorite thing about dance is their friends, but they also like stretching and pliés.

The dancers' parents attest to the positive effects dance has had on their children's overall well-being. ZiXin's mom said she's watched her daughter become more outgoing.

"She is allowed to live into who she is," said her mother. "The teachers are loving and welcoming and encouraging. They all really enjoy it."

Manso de Sousa said he sees his students improve their balance and flexibility with dance, but it's the intangible things that matter the most.

"It's the positive outlook," he said. "That's the self-joy. They feel like they're doing something for themselves and they feel like they are included."

For more information, visit [www.southernarcdance.org](http://www.southernarcdance.org) or call 770-683-3724.