



Greg Parnell Interview CASRA Newsletter February 14, 2020



Can you tell us a bit about your background – and how you got involved in the world of Zumba? Why Zumba instead of yoga or Jazercise or other possible fitness programs?

It was my 15-year sobriety birthday, so you know what happened in the past. And, I joined a gym. I spent so much of my time destroying my body that I said, yah, after fifteen years of sobriety, why not start taking care of it! I tried all the fitness classes, including yoga. Zumba was probably the worst one. The other things were basic exercise, cross-fit, boot camp, all that stuff I could do, but Zumba I couldn't. It's a long story but something happened in that class, besides the shame of being the only male and that I couldn't do it, something happened. I felt joy, like I felt when I was high. So, I thought I have to go back, it's got to get easier, now that I did it once, I know what to expect. But it was actually worse. And, my whole life was all about if I couldn't do something the first time, I didn't do it. I majored in truancy and all these crazy things. But something drove me to keep trying. I you-tubed some Salsa videos. There was a certain move called the Beto Shuffle (single, single, double), and I just couldn't do it, drove me crazy. I have no idea why. What I used to tell people is that what I lack in skill I make up for in enthusiasm. It felt like a party. The other classes just faded away, Zumba stayed. Zumba is sort of an evolution of Jazercise. But there's something about Zumba that even to this day, I notice that is so different from other fitness programs. Besides that element of joy, it's that everyone is an expert on themselves and there is no limit on what you can do. What Zumba does as a whole, globally, is a thing called Zumba Love, literally trying to change the world and make the world a better place. One "single-single double" at a time. There are some "negative" side-effects of Zumba, like chronic happiness, weight loss, increased community, increased energy – so if you want any of those things, do it! If you don't, stay away. And, again, it's really changed a lot, it's changed me completely. It's kind of doing the same thing for other people.

You're currently providing this opportunity to staff at Crestwood – how did the agency come to create this innovative program for staff health and wellness?

That's actually backwards. We started doing classes for clients in the facility I was working in up north in Eureka. And then when I started doing classes around the area, I would do Zumba for staff and residents of Crestwood when I would be in the neighborhood. The turnout at these classes was better than what I was getting in Eureka. There was a time when I was at the Bakersfield Campus – I noticed this lady right in front of me. I was doing the class high energy, lots of facial expressions. And she was doing all the moves, but with a totally straight face. A flat affect. Even kind of scared me. And so I moved to the other side of the room, and she moved with me, and every time I moved, she moved to stay with me. The class was incredible – 60 people with staff and residents in the dining room. And when it was done, one of the directors came up to me and put her hand on my shoulders – she was bawling – and I'm thinking, crap, I wasn't paying attention – someone must've gotten hurt. Normally I look for shoelaces and everything. She said, "That lady who was following you, she has been here for nine months and only comes out of her room for meals and meds. And you had her in this huge social place, and you had moving for the whole 45 minutes. That was amazing." After the Vice President of Crestwood, Patti Blum, Ph.D., heard about this event, she wanted Zumba at all the facilities. This is a way to get people up and moving, bring people joy, get people to crack that shell of whatever it is. So, I made a PowerPoint and did a roll-out to all the campuses to try to get people interested. It was incredible. I expected maybe one or two staff who'd want to get licensed. But in Bakersfield there were 13, in San Jose there were eight. Almost double digits for every campus. Then it was like, oh crap, they're not going to be able to pay for that many people! So, soon after I went to the Zumba Instructor Convention in Orlando. I was walking around and ran into Alberto Perlman, the CEO of Zumba. I told him what I was doing, working in mental health hospitals – that I was recruiting and that it was overwhelming, like too many. I had a letter that went out to all the administrators, that described the vision: At least two staff get licensed at every facility, or licensed people from the community, or use DVDs – whatever it took, Zumba was going to happen. I handed him the letter.

So, do you know who Ashley Judd is? She was our keynote speaker that year. She was amazing. She was talking about trauma and body image...she told a story about one of her friends in Georgia who had been physically and sexually abused all her life, who only felt in her body when she was in Zumba. So at that point, I said – oh I think I'm in love. She did Zumba instructions for 8000 instructors. That night was the fitness concert – live music with Zumba. Alberto Perlman talked with Ashley and showed her the letter. "We want to be involved with the project you're doing." In 2015, Zumba paid for half of the staff that got licensed (10) and Crestwood paid for the other ten.

In 2016, Patty said let's get this into our skilled nursing facilities and neurobehavioral units. The next year I rolled out the program for 20 more staff. Currently we have 52-53 employees that are licensed to teach Zumba. So you see it's kind of the other way around. It started for clients.

One of the things I noticed when I visited facilities, the more staff would participate, the more clients would participate. It started to be one of our wellness initiatives, getting everybody up, anyway we could. It varies, some campuses are doing really well, fired up and inspired with instructors that have

that passion. They have amazing classes - 30 clients and a whole bunch of staff come in. They even bring the music up to the nurses' station, since they can't leave, so they can dance too. Some people do classes specifically for staff, some for clients and it does vary from campus to campus. So it started as kind of a happy accident.

What's been the response? What benefits have you seen? Are there any outcome measures being tracked?

The response has been incredible and the benefits are amazing. I think back to Eureka, there was a gal, and I'm not going to say this was all Zumba – I mean it was everything we were doing around her. But, she was 18 and had a really awful trauma history, just horrific, including scars over most of her body. She got involved with Zumba. When she was asked why she liked Zumba, she said "I feel like I've got these bubbles in my body, and I've got to get them out." So Zumba was a great way to do this. I actually just got an email from her, and she has gone three years without a self-harm incident.

There's other people that I've heard from. This is their favorite group. People that are working with Dreamcatchers for employment, several want to be Zumba Assistants. We know all the general benefits from exercise, diabetes levels, need for insulin goes down. The "negative" benefits are weight loss, increased happiness. It is a gateway drug for other fitness programs.

We are currently doing the best we can for outcomes – it's hard, because of turnover, to actually track people. But I do know the people who stay with it, who are consistent, there is definitely a breakthrough. Some of our facilities have very difficult clients. I was at a facility for a Halloween event, doing a lot of "Zombie" moves, with Thriller and a nice mix. One of the guys was an African-American gentleman there, a big dude, and we were both really doing the zombie moves hard. After class, he said to me "Hey thanks, I really needed that." I said, "My pleasure! Your energy was contagious and made me want to do more!" Later staff came up to me and said that guy was almost in restraints five seconds before you came in. Now he was sitting there calm as a feather. These are the things I've seen. The staff in facilities think, oh no, the acuity is too high here. But I say that's when you NEED Zumba. You need to get it out.

So the question is, what do you have in people's treatment plan that's about getting them moving, getting out? This is one of those things, with encouragement, could be part of everybody's plan. How do we do it? Staff models it. Staff models having fun – that's what gets people to try it, having fun. I have so many stories, things I've seen - so many good things, every time I go out, I see change. I tell people, your energy is amazing! When you get out of here - get that meaningful role, man!

What can people expect in going to your workshop? How will your workshop help people get Zumba going in their agency?

People can expect fun. There's going to be a PowerPoint and how this happened. Then, I'll talk about ways you can get Zumba going in your agency. I can be a resource, a support. This is Zumba Fitness' first experience of having a hand in mental health. They are now doing things with Suicide Prevention and with working with people who have schizophrenia. They are starting to do their own research in this area. Crestwood was their first partnership.

Last year at the convention, they had a person who has a diagnosis of schizophrenia talk to the group about the positive impact of Zumba. She told a story about how after the first class her voices told her to stop going, so she did. She happened to run into the instructor, who told her they missed her at the class and asked where she had been and was there anything she could do to help. She told the instructor that she has schizophrenia and hears voices and that they told her not to come. The instructor just said "Well, invite your voices along. You can all come". And – she did it! She went back to class. The instructor had no experience in mental health. She just invited her into this space of wellness.

What's not to say that Zumba won't partner with other non-profits? They give us discounts for training, and discounts on Zumba-wear, which we give out to people as incentives (ten classes). Everyone gets a Zumba bracelet. The workshop will include info about Zumba mentoring (I do that as well). I really want to see this nationwide.

There will be Chair Class – to show that anybody can do Zumba. There will be a lot of education and information - a lot of laughter. And Fun!