

## TAKOMA PARK, MARYLAND

### Liz Lerman Dance Exchange

Liz Lerman likes to tell about a Dance Exchange residency at the Portsmouth Shipyard in New Hampshire. One evening, she and some of the dance company members met with a group of Navy wives, and one of them described how she had kept her submariner husband up to date on her pregnancy. “Once a month,” she said, “I would measure my belly with a length of string and send it to him. He taped the strings up on the inside of his locker, and one day a buddy of his saw them hanging there and asked about them. ‘That,’ said my husband, ‘is my baby.’” The Dance Exchange took that story, as well as the movements the woman had made when she told it, and used them in a dance piece presented on the shipyard grounds. After the performance a man came up and told Lerman, “I’ve been a welder on these ships for years, but until I saw your dance about the Navy dad and the strings that got longer and longer, I was never able to imagine the lives of the people on the boats we built. Now I can.”

Lerman reflected on how the welder’s response to the dance was one in a long series of social capital connections: A man on a submarine had responded to his friend’s display of the strings; his wife related that to the dancers who performed it; and now a welder returned to his job with a new awareness of and connection to his work.

Lately, Lerman has been pondering the nature of connections and the meaning of community. “The company was in a nursing home in Portland, Oregon,” she says. “Our sponsor, with some funding from an HMO, had put us into fourteen nursing homes in one week. At most of them, we did a workshop where we get people to talk a little about their lives and then we made up a little dance for us all to do, based on the stories, and on what movement the people could manage. In situations like that, we like to provide a chance for people to express their creativity, if only briefly. They participate in a workshop where they can use their imagination in new ways, get to know themselves a little better, or see the person who has been eating at the same table with them five nights a week for five years in a different way. We had a good session. We were leaving, at the door, when the director of the nursing home came running up to me, very excited. ‘I just heard that Shirley talked! It’s a miracle!’ she said. She said that one of the old women who had participated in our story-dance exercise had spoken that night for the first time in seven years.”

“I guess it was a miracle,” says Lerman, “but, as I mused about it later, I realized that we see similar transformations all the time. So that incident raised a lot of questions. Did that event have any lasting meaning for that woman? For the other people who live there? For the staff at the home? For us? Did what we do make a difference in their community? Or in ours? We probably helped create some sort of temporary community that evening. Or, maybe, everybody yearns so much for community that we mistake connection for community. Or is it still true that community means commitment and interaction over the long haul? If so, the life of the Dance Exchange, as a continuously evolving community, *is* the story rather than the people with whom we’ve had such good connections over the last twenty-five years.”

Contact: <http://www.danceexchange.org>

301-270-6700