

Dancing to recovery

Physical therapist uses background to help dancers heal from injuries

By Michaela Ramm, The Gazette

CEDAR RAPIDS — Rebecca Strabala spent years of her life honing her dance ability — and now she's bringing that experience to Mercy's rehabilitation team.

Strabala has spearheaded an effort to introduce dance-specific physical therapy in Cedar Rapids since she joined Mercy Medical Center's staff in February 2017, a service she wished she had when recovering from a dance injury herself.

"I was injured when I was in college, and I went to a physical therapist for that," she said. "It was a very frustrating experience actually, because I went in and she didn't know what I needed to be able to do for dance."

Now a physical therapist herself, Strabala said she began offering dance-centric therapy to provide dancers with an experience that could be tailored to them.

"Since I have the degree in dance, I feel like I have a good understanding of what they need," Strabala said.

An avid dancer since the age of 10, Strabala went on to earn dual degrees in dance and health and human physiology, as well as a Ph.D. in physical therapy from the University of Iowa.

Earlier this month, she worked with Jordan Sanders, a sophomore at St. Ambrose University in Davenport who competes with the university's dance team. She was off this season because of an injury to her medial patellofemoral ligament, which keeps the kneecap attached to the inner



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Physical therapist Rebecca Strabala (left) stabilizes the knee of Jordan Sanders, a sophomore St. Ambrose University dance team member, during a physical therapy session earlier this month. Strabala, who also has a degree in dance, offers therapy tailored to injured dancers' needs.

part of the knee.

In late February, Sanders underwent surgery to remove damaged cartilage from her knee, and she has been going to physical therapy with Strabala since.

"I've really liked it," Sanders said of the physical therapy appointments. "It's gotten me back to where I'm supposed to be."

The biggest difference be-

tween dancers and those with other sports-related injuries is that dancers tend to need a wider range of motion to help them accomplish feats such as getting their legs 90 degrees behind their body, Strabala said.

But when dancers say they need to do an arabesque, most physical therapists aren't aware of what that means, Strabala said.

"I really have that background to know when they come in and say a specific movement that they're having challenges with, I really feel like I have a deeper understanding of the kinesiology behind that and what they need to be able to do to address that," she said.

Not only does Strabala work to get her patients back to an effortless pirouette, but she tries to help dancers analyze their techniques to find what may have caused the injury.

For Sanders, she discovered through physical therapy that she was favoring one leg over the other, which ultimately led to the tear in her right knee.

"That's what caused the injury in the first place," Sanders said. "So (Strabala) has been able to help me have an equal balance in both legs, strength-wise."

This type of physical therapy also can be beneficial to other types of injuries.

Also in Cedar Rapids, UnityPoint Health-St. Luke's Hospital's Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation gym has been using a harness and track system called the Solo Step to help patients recover from strokes and spinal cord injuries, among others. In one case, that harness was used to incorporate ballroom dancing into a patient's physical therapy appointments.

Strabala hopes to expand her skill set outside the clinic and provide more education to dance studios in the area.

"I've been able to go to studios and talk to dancers about injury prevention strategies and technique and things like that to try to help reduce the rate of injuries," she said.

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