



in looking for appropriate dance training, but after 10 years of unsuccessfully searching she took matters into her own hands and DanceSyndrome was formed in 2009.

The following year Jen advertised for dancers and got over 100 enquiries! She selected 14 dancers to work with, half of whom had learning disabilities. Together they have grown into a dedicated, inclusive group of learning-disabled Dance Leaders and performers.

If you ask Jen why she started DanceSyndrome, the answer is simple "I've always wanted to share my passion for dance with others and to get everybody dancing. I want to lead workshops and choreograph performances with other dancers."

Essentially, that is what DanceSyndrome does; in addition to performing on stage at events and conferences, the charity now provides five community workshops that are all fully inclusive, allowing anyone, regardless of age, race, gender or disability, to come along and join in at a pace that suits them in a supportive environment. The workshops are designed and co-led by a learning-disabled Dance Leader and a supporting Dance Artist and many participants have described it as inspirational to see a dance activity that is led by a person with a disability.

When Jen says "I am changing people's lives through dance", she is 100% correct! Research with participants in DanceSyndrome workshops showed that they report many improvements in their lives after a workshop, including feeling physically fitter, having improved mental health, feeling that they have a better social life, having a

sense of belonging and being included, being more able to communicate and ultimately just feeling happier.

Inspired by the fantastic response to the workshops, DanceSyndrome developed a unique training course called Dance By Example which provides dance leadership opportunities for people with learning disabilities, or anyone who wants to support people with learning disabilities. The course empowers people by developing their skills and confidence and enabling them to deliver dance workshops and work with people with a variety of different needs. This course has proven to be really successful and some participants who have completed the course have gone on to follow in Jen's footsteps and lead their own community dance workshops with DanceSyndrome.

It is amazing for Jen and Sue to see how much impact DanceSyndrome has on people's lives. Sue is incredibly proud of what her daughter has achieved "Jen has always been focused on sharing her passion and getting others dancing and she has proven that together we can make people all around sit up and take notice".

People have certainly started to take notice recently. In September 2015, Jen won "Inspirational Woman of the Year" at the Enterprise Vision Awards 2015, which celebrate women in business across the North West. On winning the award Jen said "Winning this award shows that people with learning disabilities can do amazing things with their lives if given a chance."

The award has already opened doors for Jen and DanceSyndrome. So far in 2016, Jen and her

Jen Blackwell

Dancing by example

Jen Blackwell is Director and Founder of inclusive dance charity DanceSyndrome. 33 year old Jen, from Chorley, has Down's syndrome but at no point has that got in the way of her aspiration and determination. She always wanted to be a dancer and nothing was going to stop her!

Jen went to mainstream school and whilst there she realised how much she loved to dance and decided that she wanted to become a community dance worker. After leaving school in 1999, Jen found herself in the frustrating position of not being able to fulfil her ambition because there was no

suitable training for a person with a learning disability.

In 2002 Jen and her mum, Sue, were invited to give a presentation at their first national conference, Dancing Differently?, which was organised by the Foundation for Community Dance to celebrate dancers with disabilities.

There were over 200 community dancers at that event who all confirmed that the training they sought simply did not exist.

Jen's response to this was "I live for dance, it's my passion and my life. I have a right to a life of my choosing. My future lies in dance." She persisted



Photos: William Fisher



Jen Blackwell Inspirational Woman Award Winner EVAs 2015



We have so many individual success stories from dancers that Jen has helped to empower along the way

team have delivered leadership training with Barclays bank, performed and run workshops at the North West Self Advocacy Conference and Jen was selected to be an inspirational speaker at the Pink Link International Women's Day Conference in Preston on 8th March. The response to all of these events has been incredibly positive.

DanceSyndrome Managing Director Dawn Vickers says "Jen is a huge inspiration to everyone involved with DanceSyndrome. It's such a privilege

to support her and her peers to achieve their ambitions. We have so many individual success stories from dancers that Jen has helped to empower along the way."

Jen's life could have potentially been limited by learning difficulties, but thanks to her enthusiasm and determination she is living a fulfilled life, immersed in her passion for dance. Her work with DanceSyndrome is now providing opportunities to other people, with and without

disabilities, enabling them to explore their potential as leaders, dancers and valued contributors to society. By following their dreams the dancers have become role models for others, sharing DanceSyndrome's philosophy that in dance, and in life, learning disability, inclusion and equality should be the norm.

If you are inspired by Jen's story, visit www.dancesyndrome.co.uk to find out the many ways that you can get involved with DanceSyndrome's work.