

## Wellbeing Writing with Tom Boho, Niki Boho and Frances Collier



### **Tom's journey: Individual and innovative – the triumphs of dance-specific healthcare**

In 2019 at the age of 13, dancer, Tom Boho was diagnosed with Post-Concussion Syndrome following a head injury, which led to him experiencing functional neurological symptoms. Since then, Tom and mother, Niki Boho, have been on a challenging journey of recovery and discovery that has not been without its barriers. Thanks to the support of dance specialist healthcare practitioners – such as Frances Collier – Movement Therapist and Neurolinguistic Programming specialist, Tom is now back on his feet, dancing with the Centre for Advanced Training (CAT) West Midlands, 2Faced Dance (Hereford) and Linden Dance Company (Birmingham).

In this interview, Tom, Niki and Frances shared with us their reflections of working together through this process.

## **FRANCES, PERHAPS YOU COULD BREAK DOWN FOR US WHAT NEUROLINGUISTIC PROGRAMMING IS, AND HOW, IN TOM'S CASE, YOUR TREATMENT HAS BEEN SO BENEFICIAL?**

Neurolinguistic Programming looks at the language of how we say things (the 'linguistics'), how this informs our nervous systems ('neuro'), and how this influences our behavioural patterns and the way we do things ('programme'). This goes for the language of our minds, but also for the language of our bodies. This is particularly so for those of us who are embodying dance and movement as our first language when it comes to coordinating our body-brains with our every-day decisions.

As for most dancers, Tom's most organic way of communicating is through dance and choreography. But his world had suddenly asked him to stop speaking the language he knew best, and his situation challenged his movement communication.

So, we introduced a different approach, and instead of telling Tom what he cannot do anymore and freezing everything that he felt most at home with, we opted to start exploring and finding all the many small moves that still made sense to his brain and his body at the time. With every move of can-do's Tom was able to claim back more words of recovery which then helped increase the ability of his brain and his body to re-connect, then re-communicate, and with it, re-coordinate, both physically and emotionally.

There were days when Tom was able to create a powerful dance of grace and fierce dynamics alike, and there were other days when he was expressing his process in the most meaningful choreographies of stillness. I think the key for Tom's successful healing journey will always be to know that his go-to-place, namely movement and dance, will never be taken away from him. No matter what his innate calling for movement, passion will always be allowed to continue forming the basis of his health, now and in the future.

## **TOM, I UNDERSTAND THAT YOU HAVE SEEN A NUMBER OF DIFFERENT MEDICAL EXPERTS SINCE YOUR INJURY. HOW HAS THE EXPERIENCE OF WORKING WITH FRANCES BEEN DIFFERENT TO THAT OF OTHER, NON-DANCE-SPECIALIST PRACTITIONERS?**

The main difference for me was I felt Frances took the time to see me as a person, and as a dancer, rather than just an injured child, who used to dance. I had experienced a deep sense of loss. Frances recognised the value dance held in my life, she introduced new ideas, and ways of working to support my recovery. She gave me hope.

## **WHAT, FOR YOU, HAS BEEN THE BEST THING ABOUT HAVING ACCESS TO DANCE-SPECIALIST ADVICE?**

Having dance-specialist advice meant I had a better understanding of the approach taken. It enabled me to connect with it more easily, and play an active role in my own recovery by reconnecting with the dancer in me.

## **HAVE THERE BEEN ANY MOMENTS OF PARTICULAR IMPACT FOR YOU IN THE TIME THAT YOU HAVE SPENT WORKING WITH FRANCES?**

There have been many moments, but the one that stands out for me most, is when Frances introduced foot dancing. I recently included a reference to it, in a short film made for the [Teme Valley P.O.V. Project, with Rural Media](#). The introduction of foot dancing was a pivotal moment in my journey back to dance, and my recovery. Frances tasked me with doing 20 seconds of choreography, just using my feet! I'll be honest, it felt a little strange at first, but within moments of starting, something clicked, I really enjoyed it.

Each week I would create a piece of choreography and send it to Frances. She replied, sending me encouraging feedback, and setting me a new challenge, gradually increasing the duration and complexity. My brother and sister, Jake and Elena wanted to support me, so they joined in too. I choreographed each piece and taught it to them. It really helped me reconnect with my dancing self, and it was lots of fun too. I looked forward to it every week. It has really helped me see the progress I have made.

## **HAS THE EXPERIENCE OF WORKING WITH A DANCE-SPECIALIST HEALTHCARE PRACTITIONER AFFECTED THE WAY IN WHICH YOU UNDERSTAND YOUR CONDITION, AND HOW IT INTERACTS WITH YOUR DANCING BODY?**

Yes, it has definitely had a positive effect on how I view my condition. Frances showed me that by using visualisation, and my existing dance skills, I could reignite old pathways and build new ones. By using the skills learnt, and gradually building on my progress, I have regained the ability to walk and dance again. It has sparked an interest in Neurolinguistic Programming and Psychology. I am now studying A Level Psychology and Sociology at College and continue to use Frances' methods, and send her pieces of choreography.

## **NIKI, I UNDERSTAND THAT FINDING TOM THE RIGHT SUPPORT HAS BEEN A COMPLEX PROCESS. WHAT HAPPENED WHEN YOU MET FRANCES?**

Reaching out to the dance community was quite easily the best decision I made. I honestly wish everyone going through this condition were as privileged as we have been.

For the first time since Tom's injury I felt like someone was hearing me, and seeing Tom. I didn't need to fight people's negative assumptions or medical models. I remember feeling an overwhelming sense of relief, it was a very emotional moment.

Right from our first conversation I knew she understood. I could sense the love and compassion, and I was overwhelmed by her generosity of spirit. She opened our minds to alternative approaches, and new ways of thinking. Within a few short weeks, I began to see a change in Tom, I remember seeing the light come back into his eyes as he sat with his brother and sister dancing.

## **CAN YOU TELL US A LITTLE MORE ABOUT HOW FRANCES HAS BEEN INVOLVED WITH TOM'S RECOVERY? HOW LONG HAVE YOU ALL BEEN WORKING TOGETHER, AND HOW HAS THIS LOOKED?**

One Dance UK's Healthier Dancer Programme connected Frances and I in December 2020.

Frances introduced the idea of connecting with Tom's dancing self, through the use of visualising movement to music, seated dancing, and the incorporation of dance techniques such as; tendus, pliés and demi pointe, (to name just a few) into everyday activities such as sitting down and brushing your teeth. It has helped Tom learn to challenge the automatic systems, and build new, healthy neural pathways. Ultimately supporting his recovery and enjoyment of dance once again.

When we first started working together, Frances would set Tom a task to complete each week, such as visualising himself dancing, or creating a seated piece of foot choreography.

Tom's favourite task was the seated dancing, he embraced the idea, and looked forward to sending his creations, and receiving the wonderful, encouraging feedback from Frances.

Frances also gave her support to Tom when he joined CAT West Midlands, something he had long wanted to do. Frances shared her knowledge with the wonderful CAT Team to support them in creating a phased, individualised training plan of seated ballet and contemporary dance for Tom during lockdown.

We are so grateful to Frances for all she has and continues to do to support Tom in his recovery journey.