

Datebook

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Photos by John Storey / Special to The Chronicle

Seniors at the Redwoods Retirement Community in Mill Valley warm up during a dance workshop.

Seniors' life stories expressed in dance



Choreographer Liss Fain teaches seniors who are the inspiration for her "Known Once" dance project.

Choreographer Liss Fain mixes elders' memories with movement

By Beth Spotswood

Four senior citizens donning their most comfortable exercise clothes moved across a sunlit recreation room contorting their arms and twisting their legs happily and on purpose. The men and women in their 80s and 90s had been instructed to move their bodies as inspired by the word "jagged."

This was choreographer Liss Fain's warm-up for the residents of Mill Valley's Redwoods Retirement Community who participated in her "Known Once" project, and they were in heaven — well, just about.

Fain, the founder and artistic director of San Francisco's Liss Fain Dance, began working on "Known Once" this past autumn when she and her company of dancers approached the Redwoods residents with an offer: Fain would turn their life stories into dance.

Of the dozen or so Redwoods residents who showed up to take part, four seniors consistently formed the core of Fain's project: Charles Carey, Walter Kanat, Joyce Crews and Letty Erringer.

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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Liss Fain Dance brings seniors' stories to life

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"When I first started," confessed Fain, "I didn't know what we'd end up with."

The finished product won't be revealed until "Known Once" debuts in San Francisco on May 19 at Z Space, but Fain's mini-preview for the Redwoods seniors was an emotional tidal wave of spoken word interwoven with modern dance. Carey, 96, sat with his fellow residents and watched as Fain's dancers performed synchronized movements to an audio recording of his storytelling. Carey's magnified voice matched the dancers' bodies as his cherished childhood memory came to life in the middle of that Mill Valley retirement home rec room.

Carey was over the moon. Not only had his tales of starry nights on the rickety family boat been preserved in his own gentle, raspy voice and deadpan humor, but artists had transformed his story-telling gestures into a living, breathing event. It was almost as if the nonagenarian was back on that boat again, a boy staring up at those stars and dreaming of his future.

The dancers described the seniors as "brave" for their openness in sharing so much of their lives, but Carey didn't see it that way. "As you get older, your vulnerabilities change. You really don't give a damn what people think anymore." Carey smiled and said, "I am



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who I am."

"Known Once" not only uses the experience of those nearing the end of their lives, but it also taps into the stories of those closer to the beginning. Fain and her team attempted to choreograph the dance to memories and experiences from students 10 to 12 years old at 826 Valencia, a nonprofit education organization dedicated to supporting under-resourced students with story-telling skills. But when one is 11, one definitely gives a damn what people think.

"I thought it would be reversed," said Fain. "I thought it would be the younger people who would dive in. But it has been the older people who dove. The kids were really self-conscious."

Fain was still able to extract stories from the kids, and their lives will be incorporated into "Known Once," contrasting the perspective of those 70 and 80 years older. "What you see when you're 15," said Fain, "you see very, very differently when you're much older."

Fain hadn't seen her laid-

Joyce Crews (left), Walter Kanat and Charles Carey warm up with dancers during a workshop led by choreographer Liss Fain at the Redwoods Retirement Community in Mill Valley. The seniors' recorded memories are being set to dance in Fain's "Known Once" project.

gushed Fain.

The choreographer has worked with spoken word before but in the past, her dances were performed to words from the likes of Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner. Surprising herself, Fain found her local subjects' stories just as compelling. "It meant a lot to us," said Fain, thanking the seniors. "What you gave us is really important."

None of the seniors was willing to commit to making any of the show's performances in San Francisco. Revealing treasured memories from centuries of life came smooth and easy but venturing into the big city on buses and in dark theaters for hours on end could pose several potential challenges. They're comfortable in their progressive retirement community, home to Seniors for Peace, a resident-based rock group, and very few stairs.

Fain spent part of her recent afternoon with the seniors asking for a few more stories, a few more dips into reflecting pools of the past. The group sat in a circle and Fain instructed, "Describe your parents."

"Parrots?" Carey asked.

"Parents." Fain laughed.

"Your mom and dad."

"It's a shock to think about my family," said Carey after a long ponder. "I think they're more wonderful the longer I live."

Beth Spotswood is a Bay Area freelance writer.