

Elizabeth Polk ✪ Pioneer in Dance/Movement Therapy

National Register plaque dedication, Sunnyside Gardens, September 21, 2013

“One of many definitions for dance and dancing is ‘body talk.’ My body talk speaks of joyful living. My goal as a dance movement therapist is to teach this language to ‘special’ children.”

“The children are not handicapped; it is the teacher that feels sometimes handicapped, not having conveyed clearly enough what she wants. But the children have their inner sense of rhythm to guide them, they have their imagination and eagerness for self-expression. In dance we talk; this language is international and universal; it is the speech of soul.”

—Elizabeth Polk, “Dance Therapy with Special Children” in Kathleen Criddle Mason, ed., *Dance Therapy, Focus on Dance VII* (Reston, VA, 1974); and *Parent Bulletin of the Lexington Avenue School for the Deaf* (undated).



Elizabeth Polk in her home, Spring 2001

Her early dance background included ballet, Dalcroze eurhythmics, modern dance, and gymnastics. She performed as a concert dancer and opened her own studio before emigrating to the United States in 1938, shortly after Hitler took power in Austria. In 1957, she began her work as a dance therapist at the Lexington School for the Deaf in New York City, and in 1958 she cofounded the National Dance Teacher's Guild. She was a founding member of the American Dance Therapy Association [ADTA] in 1966, helping the organization to establish itself professionally in its early years. Polk was active in shaping the New York State public school curriculum and conducted more than fifty teacher workshops in the U.S. and abroad during the 1970s. From 1960 to 1982, she taught at the Children's Center for the Creative Arts at Adelphi University in Garden City, NY; she also taught classes on the history of dance and the methodology of teaching children's dance. In 1995, at the age of 93, she was honored with a lifetime achievement award from the ADTA as a chief pioneer in the dance/movement therapy field. —Heidi Landgraf, *Dance Magazine*, October 2002

What made her stand out was her keen ability to connect with the most physically challenged or emotionally disturbed children through dance and movement improvisation. Elizabeth had a delightful spontaneous quality that flowed from her playful, high spirited personality. Quite often it was necessary to be firm with the children, and she very clearly showed her strength as well as her tenderness and humor. Lacking supplies and equipment, she created and produced her own music and props—including candles, balloons, hoops, and cut up rugs—to help the children build on their own movement and to expand their abilities in the most therapeutic ways. —Dr. Eleanora DiPalma, Adjunct Professor, SUNY at the Fashion Institute of Technology

She was the first to work with emotionally and physically handicapped children as well as with normal children and their families. I remember Elizabeth speaking of one of the young girls she taught who had cerebral palsy. “She's like an Olympic athlete,” she told me, with admiration about this young girl's courage and the way she worked and moved in spite of her disability.

To supervise me at my work site, she had to take double transportation, and it took her a good hour and a half each way. At that time she was already in her 70s. Elizabeth would not hear of my paying her. Thanks to her I got my credential at that time. A great inspiration to many, she was still dancing a month before she passed away. She was a truly wonderful person. —Judith E. Klein, dance/movement therapist

Elizabeth's long and illustrious career in dance therapy included being a charter member of the ADTA, and along with other colleagues she composed the first official definition for dance therapy. In the earlier days of her career, she referred to herself as a dance teacher with a specialty in teaching creative dance to children with disabling emotional and physical conditions. In fact, she was a dance therapy pioneer, and her work with children came to be known as one of the standards for the ways in which dance therapists work with this population. Her 1974 article "Dance Therapy with Special Children" in the highly regarded *Focus on Dance VII* was the first publication in which this work was presented.

Out of Elizabeth's work with children came her very popular and widely distributed musical records: "Orchestrated Music for Special Children" and "Wake-Up, Calm-Down" (Vol. 1 & 2). Further recognition led her to help shape the curriculum in New York City Schools, and she developed teaching modules for gymnastic, physical education, and music teachers. Throughout her career Elizabeth lectured on physical education, dance, and dance therapy—teaching and presenting at conferences, seminars, and workshops in Germany, France, Mexico, and in the U.S. at Columbia University, Adelphi University, Fordham University, Brigham Young University, Peabody Conservatory of Music, New York University, and Hunter College.

She held such an enduring passion for working with children that she taught until her 89th year. She retired only because, as her daughter Grace recalled, "it became too difficult for her to carry the equipment from room to room." She was, however, delighted to learn that her employer thought her to be 19 years younger. At this time, she helped to found Timelines, a non-profit organization to promote the wisdom and creativity of elders. Elizabeth had an incredibly refreshing and positive outlook on life. For her, the glass was always full. —Dr. Nana Koch, Chair, Dept. of Health, Physical Education and Movement Science, LIU Post

As a kid in the 1950s, my dream was to be a ballerina. I was very blessed to have Mrs. Polk as a neighbor and dance teacher. She nurtured me and provided endless hours of interpretive dance instruction and ballet practice in the basement of her home. Her basement was small and simple, yet she made you feel you were expressive and elegant as you pirouetted around its floor. Her uncanny ability was to get everyone moving with poise and confidence. She was so welcoming, and so thoroughly enjoyed the magic she performed as she channeled the energies of her aspiring dancers, that I would race home from school, change into my leotard, walk down the block, and wait excitedly for her to answer her door. She provided a wealth of opportunities that made the Sunnyside Studio an inspiring and unforgettable experience. I will be forever indebted to her for providing me with the opportunity to dream at a time when you believe all things are possible.

—Debbie George, 46th St. neighbor, 1951-2001

Undated observations above have been contributed specially for today's event.

For their various contributions to this dedication, we are grateful to Eva Abbamonte, Sharon Chaiklin, Merry Chang, Annie Dell'Aria, Cristina Diaz, Eleanora DiPalma, Patricia Dorfman, Louie Franqui, Debbie George, Sharon Ghuman, Florence Gootar, Selvin Gootar, Christine Hopkins, Judith E. Klein, Nana Koch, Rob MacKay, Rev. Neil Margetson/Sunnyside Reformed Church, Steven May, Mary & Thomas McKnight, the McKnight children, Anne Mitcheltree, Dorothy Morehead, Christian Morell, Catherine O'Flaherty, Katie O'Sullivan, Arthur Pearson, Grace Polk, Dennis Redmond, Herbert Reynolds, Liz Reynolds, Irma Rodriguez, Tony Rohling, Cody Reiter, Libby Skala, Martin Skala, Margaret Z. Sutro, Rose Tibaldi, Jason Treleaven/Queens Community House, Councilman Jimmy Van Bramer, Liivia Westervelt, Tom Whelan, Jeremy Wise.



Libby Skala performed *A Time to Dance*, her play inspired by Elizabeth Polk, this evening at 7 PM at the Sunnyside Reformed Church, 48-03 Skillman Avenue.

The Elizabeth Polk memorial plaque has been placed at 39-48 46th Street, Sunnyside Gardens, Queens. The Sunnyside Gardens Preservation Alliance's National Register Plaque Program is supported by the New York City Council, Councilman Jimmy Van Bramer. 🍷