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A stricken dancer and the walker she uses to create ballet | Stu Bykofsky

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Danielle Bourgeon, who had been a dancer for most of her life, was forced to use an ugly aluminum walker. She fell into depression and self-pity.

That lasted a while, but eventually she was able to walk again. That's when Danielle decided to make lemonade, if you get my drift.

Always a dancer in spirit, she is creating a ballet, "Made Stronger," about her "journey with multiple sclerosis," she tells me. Her purpose is to encourage others who are suffering, and her stroke of genius was to incorporate her walker.

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That was risky. "I didn't want it to come off as mocking people who need to use a walker," she says. "I've spent many nights playing with the walker to see what looks interesting and gets my point across."

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her aluminum walker since piece interested me because I was on a walker after surgery. The walker, believe me, is neither lovely nor fun. (Both of us now can walk without one.)

Danielle, 33, a Chicago native who grew up in Lansdale, studied ballet at Pittsburgh's Point Park University. After her dance dreams were wrecked, she earned a bachelor's in fashion marketing at the Art Institute of Philadelphia and now works for a Lansdale marketing firm.

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Last September, she tells me with a glowing smile, she married Ukrainian native Valery Burlak, a music teacher. Her maiden name was Harrsch, but they created a new name, Bourgeon, to use as their married name. "'Bourgeon' means 'bud' in French," says Danielle, "and our nickname for each other is 'Bud.'" The Bourgeons live in Fidler Square with their cats, Gatsby and Daisy.

The music she selected for the ballet is "[Say Something](#)" by A Great Big World.

"At the beginning of the piece, I'm giving up on myself," she says, but by the end she walks away from the walker.

In May, I stopped by a Center City dance studio to see an early rehearsal. Danielle and her partner Kayla Babicki, 22, who teaches at [Philly Dance Fitness](#), conversed in the language of dance.

Danielle: "There's only two counts of skitters. We're going to lean out in a large grand plié in second, and you're going to guide my arm out and then close my hand at my mouth."

Kayla: "Are you going to open out again?"

Danielle: "Yes, then you'll guide my arm again into a low balancé and I'll repeat the section from the neurological test and pull into my passé and you put your arm around in a hug kind of thing."

Danielle demonstrated the choreography she had imagined, passing it along to Kayla, step by step, working on synchronizing moves even when they face away from each other. They recorded rehearsals to help them learn.

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"It makes me happy to make an idea she had to come to reality," says Kayla, who has known Danielle for two years.

Kayla estimates she will rehearse 24 hours to learn the four-minute piece. There is no pay. Her only reward is "the opportunity to make art with someone," says Kayla.

At the two-hour rehearsal, I witnessed a dance being born. It reminded me of the "What I Did for Love" number from *A Chorus Line*.

Danielle's investment is far more than 24 hours. There was much imagination and basic choreography before bringing in a partner.

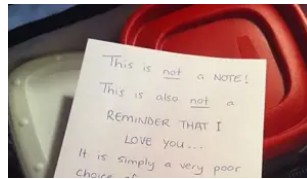
She and Kayla will perform "Made Stronger" as part of a [Philadelphia Dance Day](#) showcase at the Gershman Y, Broad and Pine Streets, at 8:30 p.m. Saturday, July 28. The [\\$10 ticket](#) includes 5 p.m. workshops.

A couple of weeks ago, Danielle's left arm went numb for a few days. From the heat, she thinks, part of living with MS. It won't ever get better. She can only hope it won't get worse.

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"I could have another episode. I could be paralyzed. I could be blind. I could not talk. There are scary qualities to MS," she says, but she won't dwell on the negative.

What Danielle will do is dance.



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