



Anastasiya talks about how she was offended at first when it was suggested she sit in a wheelchair; however, after trying it once, she understood why.

Our group was made up of: 4 specialists from the center who are passionate about dance and 3 youths with disabilities. We talk about all of our participants in "Nachalo". We decided to meet once a week at the center. At practice, we not only danced, but talked, got to know one another, and came up with a plan for the future. We decided to dance the Rumba at the festival. We chose a slow melody. We thought up moves which our dancers could do and tried to link them in combinations. We ended up with a lot of combinations. It'd be unfair to say everything went smoothly. The main obstacle was the wheelchairs. Being heavy and with limited mobility, they didn't give us the possibility to move as dynamically as we wanted. Hyperkinesia and weak muscles also didn't produce beauty or grace. It was difficult for us to think up variations to highlight our dancers.

Dancing in pairs proved extremely difficult. It was a lot of experimenting for us. We continued to meet and dance, observing, analyzing, and drawing conclusions for our movements. This was the start of a very long journey. The group "Prostor" (Expanse) was born. For us, the name stands for the unlimited possibilities of mind, movement, emotion and life. Becoming festival honorary participants, in December 2013, we realized we wanted to take the whole group to Moscow.

## The start of a long journey

**In May 2013, the director of the Arkhangelsk Rehabilitation Centre for Disabled Children, Olga Konstantinovna Bogdanova, brought us a letter about the Inclusive Dance Festival which will take place in Moscow. Why us?**

The reason is that we are not just early intervention specialist, but dance enthusiasts. We take ballroom dance classes and participate in different events, like competitions and concerts. Never before had we thought that we could dance with people in wheelchairs. We have a choreographer in our center, and of course our children dance, but they're just children. We hadn't heard of inclusive dance, nor had we known that such a thing existed.

Learning about the upcoming International Charitable Inclusive Dance Festival, organized by the "Odukhotvoreniye" (Spiritualization) Social and Cultural Center, sparked the idea and desire to try our hand at a new dance style and to involve young people with disabilities.

Of course, we had our doubts as to whether or not we could promote a completely new and relatively unknown form of creative expression, not to mention whether or not we had enough energy or creative ideas for it!

We managed to find young people who wanted to dance by finding contacts through our center's youth group, and we called them to arrange the first meeting. Our first meeting went as we expected. The whole group (6 people) immediately took to the creation process, thought of movements that could be done in a wheelchair, and tried combined dances. Together, we assessed each participant's range of motion, considering their health and disabilities. For example, Vladimir and Anastasiya, two of our participants, can move independently using a cane, but dancing while maintaining their balance proved challenging. Wheelchairs help expand their range of motion and make the dancing more dynamic. In our film "Nachalo" (The Start),





The festival was organized on a very professional level. We gave a work shop with our film “Nachalo”, spoke to other participants at the festival, and danced in the remarkable, beautiful, spacious foyer of the Stanislavsky and Nemirovich-Danchenko Theatre. For us, this wasn’t just a burst of creativity, it was a chance to come together and create further wishes. For our partners, all of the festival’s events became opportunities to prove their strength and abilities and to feel like they are truly living life to the fullest. The festival gave us strength, energy, and confidence. We grew as a team and gained another inclusive pair. We continue to practice every week and try new dances.

In Arkhangelsk, we’ve performed at conferences, charity concerts, and a family camp for those with children with disabilities. In April 2014, we took part in the third “Best Friends” charity dance marathon, organized in conjunction by the “Best Friends” support fund for individuals with developmental and mental disabilities and the “Perspektiva” Regional Public Organization of Individuals with disabilities (from Moscow). There we presented our new dance, the “Road to Harmony” tango.

We’re presently preparing to participate in the annual major north-west ballroom dance championship “Belomorskiy Rythm”. This is truly a breakthrough for us. Our movement is gaining momentum. Upcoming we have “Arkhangelsk is a creative city” competition and a concert for city day.

We’d like to personally thank Leonid Tarasov from the bottom of our hearts and his whole “army” of assistants; these beautiful bright people who have changed public opinion and the lives of those with disabilities.

Denis Kolobov, one of our group members, shared his impressions:

“You can express everything through dance: happiness, sadness, worry. Dance is an opportunity for self-expression. You cannot walk, but your soul can fly, and nobody can interfere. That’s how I feel during practice; you’re not preoccupied by anything and just soar. It’s the only thing you want to do. Dance how you can and not worry about what anyone says. Take what you can and show what you’re capable of. Let them smile in amazement. Thank you for inviting me. We have the most amazing group. Onward to new heights of dance!

*Olga Aksenova and Yulia Moreva, directors of the “Prostor” inclusive dance group  
Translated into English by Gregory Feehan*