

DANCE FOR YOUR HEALTH

A professional instructor dips into something new and is pleasantly surprised with the results.

This morning I'm taking my very first Nia dance class—a format vastly different from the ballet, hip-hop, jazz and dance-exercise classes to which I'm accustomed. Our instructor tells us that Nia is the acronym for neuromuscular integrative action. She dissolves wrinkled brows into looks of understanding as she explains that this discipline is really about yin and yang—gentleness balanced with power. Our movements will integrate modern and ethnic dance, martial arts and yoga.

She encourages us to perform our own expression of movement that honors our strengths and limitations and feeds our creative spirits. We're to focus on how we FEEL rather than how we look as we dance.

Suddenly I realize everyone is barefoot, so I slip off my shoes and tuck them into a corner. Returning to my place, I notice the candlelight casting a warm golden glow across the suspended wood floor. Anticipating a mellow, meditative format, I'm not expecting to work too hard and I'm already mentally blocking out time for a follow-up workout.

The class begins and the music and our corresponding movements are soft and gentle as we warm up our legs, our hips, our chest and our arms. The music, songs from groups like Makyo, Chemical Brothers, and the El Cosmo Group, is energetic and upbeat. It builds to a crescendo of energy and sound and our movements intensify as we follow a series of steps and patterns.

I'm amazed by the mobility I'm feeling in my spine and trunk. Many cardiovascular workouts leave my torso feeling stiff and neglected, but this class is liquefying my upper body and continuously engaging my core muscles.

Throughout the class, there are segments of freestyle dance form, where we move as we please and express our individuality under the gentle guidance of our instructor. My movements flow around a warm sea of colors and other beings like myself that are intoxicated by this opportunity to express emotions through dance. As we change directions and create our individual patterns, we find harmonious ways to travel through space without colliding or interfering with each other's movement.

At first I feel shy, but soon I forget my inhibitions and begin to feel empowered, physically and emotionally, by this opportunity. I pause for a moment as I extend my leg behind me and reach my arms forward, feeling a skin-tingling shiver of elation flowing through my cheeks. I envision myself skating across the ice rather than flowing across a suspended wood floor.

I feel an intimate connection with myself at this moment, through my breathing and expressive body movement. In my own little world, I feel strong, beautiful, agile and grateful to be alive. As the sweat rolls down my cheeks, I realize that I won't need any additional exercise later and that this class has provided me with a workout

to heal herself and to rediscover a long-lost mind-body connection. Now an instructor as well as a Nia participant, Jenrow believes that her health has improved as a result of the joy and stress relief she experiences through movement.

Local business owner Michelle Marking, 35, has been taking Nia classes for over three years. "I knew from the first day I stepped into class that the experience was going to be extremely special." For Marking, Nia was the perfect complement to her Pilates training. "With Sue [Instructor Susan Benner], I found the real magic of a teaching professional who is not only an amazing dancer and teacher but someone who infuses true joy in what she does. Her energy and joy are infectious...her classes are FUN!"

The Nia class has a special meaning for each one of us. When I was a little girl, the two things I loved doing most were writing and dancing to my favorite music, which explains why I was so enchanted with the entire Nia experience—once again I had the freedom to allow the music, the people around me and my life to flow through me and to direct my movements.

My interest in dance began in the early 80s, while taking "high impact" classes at the Clemson University recreation center. My enthusiasm eventually led to dance-exercise certification through the American Fitness Association of America (AFAA). I continue to reap many benefits from teaching and participating in dance-exercise classes. Teaching provides me with opportunities to help others find safe and enjoyable ways to pursue an active lifestyle, while taking classes like this one broadens my knowledge about new trends in the fitness industry and enables me to appreciate the special qualities and enthusiasm that different instructors bring to their classes. If dancing is something you've always enjoyed, don't hesitate to join the Nia experience, a format appropriate for any fitness level, age or body type. Other dance classes, such as salsa, ballet, hip-hop and jazz can add fun and variety to your program. Even when you're out on the town, take advantage of the opportunity to burn a few extra calories by boogieing down to your favorite band. So get up and move that body! **F**



along with a variety of intangible benefits.

We close with stretching and relaxation, and I wonder what motivates these 20 participants to attend this class on a regular basis. Later, I have the opportunity to learn about three journeys into the world of Nia.

Mary Ellen Peterson taught group fitness for 25 years before discovering Nia, which challenged her and was more enjoyable than any class she had taken previously. "For me, Nia is a free-spirited, non-competitive, self-respecting way of doing something good for myself."

Lynne Jenrow, 43, began taking Nia after spending a year practicing Chi Gung. Chronically weakened by endometriosis and Addison's disease, Jenrow aspired

— Susan Dawson-Cook, M.S.

Get moving and find a class that suits your style.

In Tucson:

El Parador (Salsa) (520) 881-2808

Body Works Studio, Inc. (Nia)

www.bodyworksstudio.com (520) 323-7070

In Phoenix:

Contours Express of Gilbert (Bellydancing, Hip-Hip) (480) 507-3707