

Body-mind-spirit fitness program Nia keeps participants moving 25 years on

Lauren La Rose, THE CANADIAN PRESS

TORONTO - People expect to break a sweat during their workout - what they likely don't anticipate is a celebration. If that's the case, they've probably never been to a Nia class. The atmosphere was one of jubilation among the vibrant, barefoot enthusiasts of the fitness program who packed a recent special class in Toronto. Participants filled out the vast, dimmed room at a cultural and education centre, soaking in the soaring rhythms and shaking loose and clapping to the beat.

Members of the mostly female group cut across a wide swath of ages and levels of agility and flexibility. Yet as the music streamed from the speakers, the participants seemed to ebb, flow and float throughout the space effortlessly in sync with the pulsating beats, which ranged from uptempo numbers to slower-paced tunes.

They transitioned seamlessly through varied movements, from full body stretches to powerful outward blocks, punches and leg kicks, swirling hip circles and shoulder shimmies. Yet unlike other group-led aerobics programs where participants try to keep up by modelling their moves to mirror the instructor, Nia adheres to a different philosophy: move in a way that best suits you.

"You're constantly bringing it back to your own body, not looking out to the teachers," said Nia co-founder Debbie Rosas. "The teacher really inspires and motivates, but the modelling is not about 'Do it my way.' The modelling is about do it in a way that feels fun, expressive, comfortable." The formula behind the body-mind-spirit program seems to have resonated. A quarter-century since Nia's creation, the specialized technique which blends movement forms and Eastern and Western traditions from martial arts, dance arts and healing arts, like yoga, has approximately 2,000 licensed teachers in more than 37 countries around the globe.

Co-founders Debbie Rosas and Carlos Rosas are making the 25th anniversary a global event by embarking on a tour that has already stopped in 20 cities. The latest leg of the journey for the formerly married couple has brought them to Canada. Debbie Rosas said the tour is a way to honour the support and passion demonstrated by Nia instructors over the years.

"The best way we can give back to a community is to go to that community and to really celebrate with those teachers and honour those teachers for what they've created," she said hours before leading a high-energy Nia class.

The fitness professionals created Nia in the early 1980s as they sought out a smarter and less painful way for individuals to work out and keep in shape. In addition to blending various forms of movement from influences as varied as jazz and tae kwon do, Nia's emphasis is on a holistic approach integrating the mind and inner emotions to bring them in sync with the outer body.



Nia enthusiasts participate in a workshop in Toronto on Thursday, June 18, 2009. THE CANADIAN PRESS/Darren Calabrese

Debbie Rosas said one of the reasons Nia is so popular across a wide range of ages is that people are taught to adapt the movement to fit their body's way. "Even though they're following the music and they're doing movements that are choreographed, the choreography is actually a blend of structured movement and unstructured movement," said Rosas, who is based in Portland, Ore.

"People explore the movement and dance to the music but in the process, they discover their way and we call that moving in your body's way, and that's how people really make a personal connection to what they're doing. It's the personal connection to moving that really creates the mind-body connection."

Core foundation movements in Nia include basic heel-leading steps and martial arts moves like outward and upward blocks, punches and strikes, as well as kicks and knee sweeps. Dance elements incorporate the use of hand movements and stretches. In a nod to martial arts, Nia has its own belt system, where students progress through different levels of education, skill sets and proficiency. And it's not just the body that gets a workout in Nia - participants are also encouraged to put their voices to use.

As participants in Debbie's class stretched and raised their arms above their heads repetitively during one sequence, they looked towards the ceiling and emphatically shouted "Yes!" each time they reached skyward. Samantha Lowes has been practising Nia for about 5 1/2 years. The self-employed bookkeeper and mother purchased a Nia video at a yoga show, did it the next day at home and recalls feeling "blown away by how great it felt, how it was all about the joy of movement, feeling pleasure in my body." The day after that, she went to a class.

"I just felt energized and alive in a way I normally don't feel; an extra layer of enjoyment that I didn't get from regular exercise, even doing yoga," said the 36-year-old. "I think the component of creativity and being told there's no wrong way to do it, being told that I can create a beautiful movement - there's an artistic angle to Nia that is very freeing."

Anna Schantz, a black belt Nia instructor, said she finds her students not only connect with themselves on a deeper level but with each other. "There have been very fast friendships made in the classes, and if you look in the room tonight, you'll see that this is not your basic step aerobics class; this is a celebration of people."

For Nia black belt trainer Roberta Mohler, who has been teaching the technique for 13 years, what she said she loves about Nia is that it allows her to "dance every day." "The movements are sensitive to the body and very natural so that I feel like I can dance till I'm 100 - and that's exactly what I plan to do."

On The Net:

Nia: www.nianow.com

Nia Instructors Association of Canada: www.niac.ca

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