



Mind, spirit and exercise

New fitness technique fuses martial arts, dance and healing arts, instructor says

BY JOHANNA WEIDNER
GRAND RIVER LIFE

Sure, she teaches it. But even instructor Tina Payton struggles to explain the fitness technique of Nia.

"It's a mind, body, spirit, emotion form of fitness," Payton said.

A fusion of martial arts, dance and healing arts like yoga, Nia is definitely out of the ordinary.

Nia, pronounced knee-ah and short for neuromuscular integrative action, has been around for more than two decades. It's popular in big cities and only now catching on in this region.

Nia looks simple, Payton said, but it goes a lot deeper.

"There's a lot more to it than just moving your body. It encompasses your whole body," Payton said.

The holistic, barefoot exercise certainly looks unlike anything normally done in fitness centres.

Movements during a recent trial class at Impact Movement Studio in downtown Kitchener ranged from gently swaying arms and hips, to rapid dance moves. Accompanying music ranged similarly from soft, new age compositions to fast songs with a rhythmic beat.

"We're moving our entire bodies. We don't neglect anything," Payton told the class. "You might find you're feeling parts of your body you've never felt before."

There are 52 moves, all adaptable depending on ability. That means Nia is suitable for anyone, no matter their fitness or flexibility.

Plus, it has non-impact aerobics so it's suitable for people with knee troubles, like Payton after years of competitive running, or chronic ailments like fibromyalgia. Payton has even taught Nia to seniors, some standing while others depended on walkers or wheelchairs.

"It's all very gentle," Payton said.

Unlike many other exercise forms, Nia doesn't push the "no pain, no gain"

NIA CLASSES

Tina Payton teaches Nia classes in Kitchener and Cambridge.

Contact Payton by calling 745-8663.

mentality. Instead, participants are told if something hurts, stop or go easier.

"It's learning to love your body and to respect it," Payton said.

"You get to your goal faster if you're nice to yourself."

Karen Elker, of Kitchener, appreciated Nia's gentle nature. She has chronic fibromyalgia, and the stretches seemed to help loosen painful muscles, particularly her tight shoulders.

"You can feel the difference," said Elker, who attended Payton's trial class.

Low-impact also means "it doesn't hurt anything," she said.

But that approach doesn't mean Nia is not strenuous.

"It's a good workout. I actually worked up a sweat. I was surprised," said Jane Stewart after the class. "It exercises all parts of the body. I felt that."

The Kitchener woman has tried tai chi and yoga, and she has an orange belt in karate. Although she wasn't sure what to expect with Nia, Stewart quickly got into the unique fitness form.

"This is wonderful," she said. "It's relaxing. You've got a flow. You're dancing."

Compared to her time spent at the gym, she said, "This is a lot more fun. It brightens you up."

That's what attracted Payton. She soon bored of the repetitive routines in aerobics, weights, pilates, yoga and competitive running.

She bought Nia videos a few years ago, since there were no local classes, and immediately "decided that it was very interesting and eclectic. It didn't

seem like it would get boring," she said.

After taking a few classes in Toronto, a difficult venture for a mother of two young children, Payton signed up for a training course in 2003.

"I figured the best way to do it was just jump into it," she said. Plus, "there was nothing here."

Teachers are trained through a course developed by a Portland, Ore. couple, who pioneered Nia in the early 1980s. Debbie and Carlos Rosas have put out books and videos, and now there are about 1,500 Nia teachers in 28 countries.

Payton teaches classes in fitness studios and community centres, as well as workshops for university students, adults and seniors.

"The people who have been with me for a while are hooked on it," Payton said.

Yet, she said, "Nia is still intimidating for some people."

Most balk at the gentle approach, and many are put off by what Payton calls "earthy speak" and mind-body-spirit connection associated with Nia.

"I've actually had a couple people think it was a cult," Payton said.

Different is a word often used to describe Nia.

"It was very different. It was interesting," Sarah Hicks said after Payton's class.

But, also "it was relaxing, a nice stress-reliever."

And that is what Payton likes people to get from her Nia classes. Many people are bogged down and tense from stressful days.

"It's kind of a chance to get out of that and just goof off," she said. "It's just fun."

Nia, with its movements that can be wild and carefree, is reminiscent of children having fun, simply enjoying the feeling of their body moving.

"It's play," Payton said. "That's my goal with this, to let people let loose."

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Tina Payton leads a class in Nia, a holistic type of fitness that blends yoga, tai chi, martial arts, and dance.

Among the students are Sarah Hicks (in green top) and Jane Stewart (wearing white).

PHOTOGRAPHS
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GRAND RIVER LIFE

