



# ...an Exercise in Expression

by Vita Wind

There's exercise that deals solely with the physical - the treadmill and weight routine - and then there's Nia, which seeks to do more than get your heart pumping - although that too is part of it. Through a wonderful alchemy of movement and music, Nia is experienced on a deeply personal level. Exercise, yes, but with the effect of re-establishing a connection between mind, body and spirit.

In Nia, the emphasis is less on following the steps and more on feeling and expressing. "Whether they come to Nia for the emotional connection or for the cardiovascular workout, I encourage the men and women in my classes to personalize the movement, making it their own," says Wendy Roman, a Nia Blue Belt instructor who teaches in Grey Bruce.

Nia, a Swahili word for "with purpose," is a carefully choreographed combination of movements taken from dance arts, the martial arts and the healing arts. And the premise is basic: Through Movement We Find Health.

Indeed, there are many who teach Nia for its health giving benefits. Among the nearly 70 Nia instructors in Ontario, there are those whose specialized backgrounds allow them to offer unique classes to those recovering from illnesses, those with chronic health problems, and those who suffer from depression, to name but a few.

In the General Classes taught by the four teachers in Grey Bruce, healthfulness is a side benefit derived while students dance through the class routine. Many dancers have come out of the closet and joined Nia classes specifically because of the freedom of physical expression it encourages. "People feel like dancers, without having to know or memorize complicated steps," says Jean Kidd-Miller, of her students in the Georgian Triangle. "At the

same time, as they're building a physical confidence, that confidence spills over into the rest of their lives."

The great challenge, and fun, of Nia is to learn to abandon a lifetime's worth of physical restraint, and enjoy movement for movement's sake. The release and pure joy that such physicality can give is rarely met in any other type of fitness class. The goal is expressive movement without self-consciousness.

Unlike traditional aerobics, there's minimal jumping and all action is done with a sense of ease, yet control, utilizing the core muscles to support the movement. Dancers are encouraged to work only as hard as what feels right for their bodies and level of conditioning. Thus there is harmony in a class of dancers of diverse fitness levels, because each routine is presented with three levels of intensity. The student's body naturally moves to the level that is just right that particular day, or even during that one particular song.

Moving naturally and in the body is also derived by dancing barefoot, so feet can feel the floor. The sense of feeling grounded and stable - both physically and emotionally - begins with the feet feeling connected to the earth.

Music is varied throughout the course of a class and is carefully selected to pace the workout. Certain types of music are used to evoke specific reactions. Rhythm is stimulating on a physical level, while melody can access the emotions, and harmony can tap into the spiritual realm.

While the basis of a Nia routine is dance, it also incorporates contrasting movements, for instance, fluid, elongating stretches juxtaposed with muscle-contracting martial poses and stances - a mix of textures, both hard and soft. But a lot of Nia is about play. Teachers use visualization and imagery to help dancers release and let go of the mind. Getting into the body is often achieved through free dance and other methods of playfulness.

"It's rewarding to see the smiles on my students' faces, and a real bonus when I hear them laugh out loud," says Susie Montgomery, who teaches in Sauble. She especially enjoys the part of a routine when she can encourage her students to use their bodies inventiveness to move playfully around the room.

"At first you feel shy and silly," says Carol Rogers, a student at a recent Toronto playfulness workshop. "But eventually you realize that feeling this way is restrictive. You see everyone else with their eyes closed, inside their bodies, enjoying and feeling their dance, and realize, no one is judging me, I too can be free. It's not about being a witness, it's about participating, using my imagination, living in the moment, having fun."

Vita Wind has been a Nia dancer for seven years. Having recently given up her corporate worklife, she is now a Nia White Belt instructor living near Markdale and teaches Nia in Grey Bruce. visit [www.niac.ca/on](http://www.niac.ca/on).