

The Outpost *Exchange*
The Nia Technique
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December 12, 2001
1,500 words

Check your athletic shoes—and your inhibitions—at the door and prepare to play, shout, dance and have fun. Oh yeah, and get a good workout. Welcome to The Nia Technique, an aerobic fitness program that will get you moving, grooving and sweating, all without pounding, pumping or crunching. Yes, we're talking gain without pain, exhilaration without excruciation. And good music to boot.

“Nia is fitness for the new millennium. It encompasses emotional, mental and imagination fitness” as well as physical fitness, said Deborah Kern, a former aerobics instructor and currently a black belt Nia trainer in Dallas, TX. Kern visited Milwaukee recently to lead a number of classes.

“People got so bored with conventional aerobics. If you're bored in [your exercise] class, your imagination muscle is not fit. To keep interest in aerobics, instructors had to start doing some wild stuff, like making the steps more complicated and speeding up the music,” Kern said. “Some of it was dangerous—students were wrecking knees” and getting injured.

In the early descriptions of Nia (pronounced Knee-Uh) the name was explained as an acronym for non-impact aerobics, but the founders of the technique refer to it as neuromuscular integrative action. A less contrived meaning comes from the Swahili translation of the word, which is “with purpose.” Although the founders discovered this meaning accidentally, the translation suits the technique well. Every aspect of Nia has a reason and a purpose. The overall idea of the technique is to engage the body, mind and spirit. But the thoughtfulness breaks down further to the individual routines, including the specific music selected, the intent suggested, the steps created and the words spoken. There is no mindless jumping around, no empty cheer from the teacher, no mind-numbing music.

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Nia/Jacobus—Add One

“We create one-hour works (routines) with a focus and an intent,” said Nia co-founder Debbie Rosas in a recent phone interview. “We don’t just focus on the cardiovascular. We look at the cycles of balance, breath work and sound. We create a relationship to the movement, the music and the magic.” Rosas explains that all aspects of the routines are evaluated using three criteria:

- Science—“How is it helping the human body?”
- Craft—“How should the motion be executed so it helps the body heal and be in shape?”
- Art—“These are the techniques. We use an awareness of how the body best responds so we can make loving choices for the body.”

Performed barefoot, Nia is a potpourri of fitness, movement and mind-body-spirit techniques. An hour-long routine typically includes simple modern and jazz dance moves along with some free-form dance, a smattering of tai chi, tae kwon do and aikido, and a dash of Feldenkrais, Alexander Technique and yoga. “Nia allows for unlimited movement possibilities because it pulls from so many different disciplines,” Kern said. There are many contrasts: moving from hard to soft, linear to circular, aggressive to passive, masculine to feminine.

Added to the movement is a mental workout. Teachers encourage visualization, playfulness and creativity. Instead of telling students to “bend and reach, bend and reach,” at a recent class students were asked to envision dipping down into a paint bucket and then, with an arching swoop, to paint a rainbow. This image matched the achingly beautiful rendition of “Somewhere Over the Rainbow/What a Wonderful World” being sung by Hawaiian-born artist Iz at the time of the movement. An altogether different experience than, “Bend and reach.”

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Nia/Jacobus—Add Two

Sound comes into play not only through the music selected, but in noises students are encouraged to make in class. During the martial arts movements, students let out a guttural, “Hah!” or a defiant, “No!” or an affirming, “Yes!” “Some people may have felt they had nothing to scream about pre-September 11,” Kern said, “but we all now have things we need to release and yell, ‘No!’ to.” Kern acknowledges that some participants may feel too inhibited to let out such a cry, but she points out that those are exactly the people who most need to do it. “The part that people feel least comfortable with is the part that they need to do. They need to get that out,” she said. Rosas adds, “If the emotional body gets strong and gets to play, it’s less likely to act out in inappropriate, hurtful ways.”

As we have moved into the 21st century, Americans seem to be becoming more introspective, looking for “balance” and “quality time” versus constant activity and external distraction. This is true in our exercise choices as well, with yoga, tai chi, meditation and other such activities coming back into vogue. Instead of hearing, “Feel the burn” in exercise class, students may now hear, “Connect to spirit.” The words mind/body/spirit and wellness have become so mainstream today, however, they are almost hackneyed, being attached to everything from make-up to candy bars.

But Nia comes by such descriptors honestly. Although it perfectly reflects the current kinder, gentler American psyche and current obsession with holistic approaches, the amazing thing is that co-founders Debbie Rosas and Carlos Rosas developed the concept nearly 20 years ago, at the height of the Me Generation frenzy and the aerobics craze. Debbie was running a highly successful aerobics studio in Southern California with 50 instructors when she and her then-husband Carlos asked themselves, “‘How many more jumping jacks can we do?’ In 1983, we stopped all the jogging up and down and took off our shoes,” Debbie said. The couple looked to the philosophies and techniques of martial arts, dance and integrative healing programs, such as yoga and Feldenkrais, to start developing a new breed of fitness activity. “We liked the emotional expression of dance, the precision of the martial arts and the healing of [modalities like] yoga,” Debbie said.

Nia/Jacobus—Add Three

Although her fitness business took a high impact hit—many of her aerobics instructors staged a mutiny when she and Carlos changed over to the new methodology—Nia today boasts 20,000 students and 550 teachers around the world.

“The foresight to change didn’t come from our minds, it came from our bodies,” Rosas said, who though now divorced from Carlos, continues to work with him as business and creative partner.

“The body has an intelligence and wisdom beyond telling us to go to the bathroom and to eat. All listening means is to feel—when you take your shoes off, you can feel. When you slow down and pay attention, you can feel. When you can feel, you can heal.”

Barb Wesson knows the truth of that. The black belt Nia instructor has been teaching for more than 4 years at a number of venues throughout Milwaukee. “Nia is terrific for people who need to heal,” she said, be it physically or emotionally. “Nia allows expression. I’m in it for emotional healing as well as fitness. Nia is not so much about losing weight and breaking a sweat, as it is moving the emotions and the body. That’s where I’m taking Nia—expressing joy. We all feel better when class is done, even if we’re crying.”

Nia advocates state that the program is suitable for just about anyone—young or old, fit or unfit, dancer and non-dancer alike. Kern, the instructor from Dallas, cites students as young as 8 and as old as 78 in her classes. One student, who had polio as a child, comes in her braces. Another with severe asthma also attends. Both sit in chairs and imagine they are dancing. Kern believes everyone yearns to dance. “If you look under a microscope, even our cells are dancing,” she said. “Dance allows the human spirit the chance to move in the physical form,” Rosas said.

But one need not *be* a dancer to *feel* like one...or to become one. “I have transformed,” Wesson said. “I am a dancer now. Before I was stiff; now everything is a flow.” Wesson had absolutely no dance experience before training to become a Nia instructor.

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Nia/Jacobus—Add Four

Kate Mann, on the other hand, *is* a dancer. The 48-year-old Whitefish Bay resident is trained in modern dance and has been dancing professionally and for enjoyment her entire life. Currently, she's a dance educator, choreographer and self-described life-long learner. She's also a Nia fan. "Nia has the sweat, but also a range of motion and a range of expression. Unlike aerobics [which she also does] Nia acknowledges that we are a spirit, not just a body," she said in a recent interview. "Nia gives the spirit inside a place to express itself through movement while the body is getting a great workout. To feel my body be strong, graceful and fluid in space—there's nothing to compare it to."

Mann has had difficulty finding a class in town that challenges her physically and works out her creative muscles. She cites that most pure dance classes are for the young and flexible, while classes for the older set are dumbed down. Like Goldilocks lying down in baby bear's bed, Mann finds Nia just right. "The movements are wonderful. Because they are easy to follow, you can absorb them into your muscles and bones right away. The patterns are simple and repeatable—like a folk or ethnic dance. This allows the spirit to open up. The simple moves allow the spirit and emotions to come through," she said. "I feel young. It allows me to feel the youthful sensations of being free, flexible and graceful."

For more information on the Nia Technique and a full list of area instructors, locations and upcoming events, log on to Niawisconsin.com. **February 1-3, 2001** Michelle Kaiman, Nia black belt and martial arts expert, will be hosting workshops and master classes in the Milwaukee area. Check the website for more information.

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