

LIVE WELL: Nia fitness draws on martial, dance and healing arts

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2010-07-28 10:05:25



Care to dance?

Nia is a fitness class designed to help you dance through life, according to Nia black belt and instructor Loretta Milo, who has taught for six years.

I can get behind that.

Nia is described as a blend of martial, healing and dance arts. It's an hour-long fitness class held in many different locations all over the city. I popped in on a late Friday afternoon at the downtown YMCA, where Milo held court.

The class was overwhelmingly female, with one lone man there with his girlfriend. The age of the class was across the board, though most were in their 30s and older.

Milo calls Nia holistic fitness. Carlos and Debbie Rosas are the founders of the fitness style. They dreamed up the concept in the early 1980s because they wanted some sort of exercise that didn't involve jumping around, jarring and, perhaps, harming the body. They slipped off their shoes and began to explore tai chi, taekwondo and aikido.

Each has a different sensation, Milo said. Tai chi is a slow dance. Taekwondo is masculine and punch-intensive. Aikido is harmonious, spherical movement.

But they needed to add a splash of fun so it would stick to people. That's where dance arts came in, with jazz, modern and Duncan dance (named after Isadora Duncan, who danced barefoot and child-like with swaying arms).

Now the practice needed to incorporate body awareness, so the practitioner wouldn't get hurt. This led to a pinch of Feldenkrais, the study of how you use your body, both sitting and standing, and then re-teaching the body to move more correctly. A smidge of the Alexander Technique brought an awareness of the head, and a dab of yoga, used to help decipher where the body is in space, rounded out the practice.

With all that swimming in my mind, I took off my shoes to join the other barefooted students who were champing at the bit to get going.

The music, thick with drums, made me sway. I tried to remember the advice from zumba class: bend the knees to roll the hips. There's plenty of opportunity to practice this in a Nia class. Frequently, we stood in place, lightly shaking our hips with jazz hands, shimmying our chests and then rolling out our necks.

We warmed up slowly, gently, then kicked it into a higher gear, though the option is there to keep the impact very low. We moved sideways, forward and backward, and then began the martial arts section. It reminded me of my years in kickboxing classes. The arm workout, with its jabs, punches and uppercuts, will slice the

fat right off your arms. The high kicks and roundhouses will firm up fleshy rumps.

We cooled down and then wound up on the ground, literally. Milo had us get on our backs and slither around, rolling onto our bellies and back, waving our arms and finding organic movement. We did a bit of core work with planks, stretched out with a brief yoga sequence and found a final child's pose.

I moved, I sweated, I smiled. My heart rate increased, and I got a workout, but not to the point of feeling exhausted. This class is appropriate for anybody, all ages, all fitness levels. Regular attendance can result in increased flexibility, agility, mobility, strength and stability.

Another nice thing: Classes are always different. You won't do the same choreography every time.

Nia is not only about the physical movement of the body. There are five belts involved that allow a student to explore their mental and emotional worlds as well. It follows the traditional martial arts model, progressing from white to black. For instance, the white belt sets its sights on physical sensation, while the black belt is all about creativity and transformation.

There are 13 principles in the Nia world. Students study these as they move through their belts. Awareness of the body and paying attention to what it needs is huge. Milo believes that Nia can encourage people to listen to that body intuition and learn to honor it.

LaSheryl Olson, a brown belt, has been a Nia lover for over three years and now teaches. The practice helps the young and the old alike, she believes.

"I love that we go to the floor. In our aging population, it's so important to be able to get yourself up," she said.

"The primary purpose of Nia," Milo said, "is to do it until the day you die."

For more about Nia in the Springs, visit springsnia.com and niacolorado.com.

Jennifer Mulson teaches vinyasa yoga at Corepower Yoga and Gold's Gym in Colorado Springs. Read more Live Well columns and watch yoga videos at gazette.com.

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