

# Me



# & Nia



One woman rekindles her love of dance when she embraces a new fitness form called Nia.

BY HARRIET EISENKRAFT

Every week, sometimes several times a week, you will find me among a multiage group of about 25 people who are dancing barefoot in a midtown Toronto church basement. In my midlife, I have returned to something I used to love – and still love and need – to do. I discovered it with Nia, a fitness hybrid that blends dance, martial arts and healing arts such as yoga. And while those latter two forms are good for me, it is that first one that keeps me coming back: I gotta dance, and I get to dance at Nia.

Nia helped Harriet Eisenkraft “find her own dance.”

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But I do it differently than before. Nia (pronounced knee-ah) stands for *neuromuscular integrative action*, a rather technical-sounding term that belies its creative nature. In Nia we take off our shoes and follow a series of steps, stances and stretches. Accompanying all this is music, which may range from Latin to Celtic and from Sting to the sweet vocal and harp chords of Loreena McKennitt. I often work up a sweat during the aerobic part of the routine, but there's no repetitive jogging, no relentlessly synthesized rhythm machine and nobody barking instructions.

Instead, my teacher, Martha Randall, calls out the moves using a vocabulary replete with visual imagery: "move your arms like wings; open your thighs in smiles; and swing your tails from side to side." Our bodies may be waves in one set and we could be casting off, with our hands and even our voices, the day's troubles in the next one.

It sounds very New Age, and certainly proponents call it a "soulful workout," but Nia is actually pretty down to earth, sometimes literally. While a short portion of each class may be devoted to free dance, the session consists mainly of a structured, concerted routine (indeed, *Nia* means "with purpose" in Swahili).

Martha encourages each participant to "find your own dance," and in doing so, I improve my agility, balance and stamina.

My classmates are mainly women ranging in age from 20 to 75. Beside me might be an athlete, someone with

arthritis, a woman with an anxiety condition or a professional dancer. We come in all shapes and sizes: buff, overweight or skinny. Some look much healthier and more toned after a few months of regular attendance; others simply seem happier. Many of us have spent a lifetime participating in other kinds of classes, sometimes with strident instruction that left us feeling tense or belittled. We all come here to experience a similar joyfulness, and no matter what our particular level or capacity, we move capably and sometimes riotously through the room. Facing the teacher, who dances with us, we form several lines across the wooden floor of a very basic basement studio while Martha's portable sound system plays music.

Another important benefit for me is that for the first time in many decades of dance and other fitness classes, I experience none of the aches and pains I had come to accept as part of a pursuit that I love. Traditional training often causes physical suffering; many professionals end up with chronic, crippling injuries. Nia espouses the pleasure principle – do it if it feels good, stop if it doesn't – and that seems to make sense to my body.

I attribute the good fit between Nia and me to two factors. The first is that it

brings me back to the elation I have often felt over the years when dancing socially or in the depth of choreographed routines to favourite music. The second is that Martha, my teacher, creates the same whimsical, nonjudgmental atmosphere as did one of my earliest dance instructors, whom I remember as Madame Sonia. Unlike some of the others who inspired acute fear in young students, Madame Sonia took a group of gangling preadolescents, taught us the foundations and then constantly conveyed her happiness with us. We loved doing our best for her.

After that I continued to try almost every form of dance class available: jazz, modern, ballet, Latin, tap, tango and ballroom. I have done yoga, tai chi, kung fu, Pilates (in which I really missed the music) and countless aerobic classes (in which I really disliked the music). For about a decade the only dancing I did was with my young children and husband to Saturday night oldies. Eventually I fell into a type of physical lassitude until I found out that Nia – with its promise of an expressive, energizing workout – was available near my home. And so I walked into Martha's class.

Perhaps I was looking for that fusion of forms that Nia provides. It turns out that I'm not alone. Many Canadian cities and towns, particularly in Ontario and British Columbia, hum with Nia activity. In Toronto alone, there are dozens of qualified teachers, with numbers similar to San Francisco, near where it all started back in the early 1980s. There are about 45 classes around B.C., and there are also teachers in Yellowknife and parts of Alberta. Classes are located in church halls, university classrooms, exercise rooms of spas and once even on a military base. To find a location near you, visit [www.niac.ca](http://www.niac.ca).

Well into my own Nia conversion, I suggested to my then 16-year-old ▶

daughter that she join me. She came to the first class reluctantly and only because she had developed sore muscles due to long hours of violin and guitar practice. Two years later, she still shows up occasionally, much to my delight. There's room at Nia for both of us, and we dance there as equals.

No matter what else may be going on between us, we have fun together, and she occasionally drifts over my way if we have to pair up or do improvisational stuff. When Martha has her musician friend come in to play his drums and trumpet for the class, it feels like a party – always a magnet for my teenager.

Nia has put dance front and centre in my life once more. Our family has started to bop around in the living room again on Saturday nights when my two kids are home. In class something continues to resonate: it's hard work that feels like play. My teacher sometimes notes choreography changes by calling out, "Join me here." And so I leap in with a full heart. ●

## The Facts About Nia

**Nia's program combines various dance steps with martial arts and healing arts, including yoga.** These are often fused together during routines to the sounds and rhythms of jazz, blues, world beat, funk and pop music, with occasional nature tracks or percussion.

Nia was founded by Carlos Rosas, a former tennis teaching professional, and Debbie Rosas, who headed an aerobics empire in the Bay area of California. Looking for an antidote to the no pain, no gain attitude that prevailed two decades ago, they created a workout that raises heart rates at the same time as it emphasizes the mind-body-spirit possibilities of fitness.

"It's like a movement meditation that leaves one both calm and energized," says Jan Rakovsky, a former competitive athlete and now an instructor in the school of kinesiology and health sciences at York University in Toronto. Nia technique is the foundation of one of the main practicum courses that she teaches. "Its movement options create strength, flexibility, balance and cardiovascular benefits – the hallmarks of good health and fitness."

Leith Drury, a doctoral candidate in sports psychology and a world champion triathlete in his age group, adds that Nia is "challenging but self-monitored and, most importantly, people stick with it because it's fun." For optimum fitness and weight control, Drury advises supplementing two 60-minute Nia classes weekly with three 45-minute vigorous walks.

There are now 1,000 Nia instructors in more than 20 countries. They come from the worlds of dance, sports, yoga, aerobics and other fitness forms – and even psychotherapy – and bring a vast range of experience and expertise.