

Freshness Factor Breathes Life Into Nia Routine

Lessons learned from the instructors

BY ELISE OBERLIESEN



Looking for ways to spruce up your Nia™ routine? Maybe the drab studio begs for new sounds, or perhaps a few other ideas to inject life back into your program. Nia instructors like brownbelt Laurie Pemberton like to shake things up. She did just that by co-piloting an annual Nia retreat that fed the mind-body connection.

Pemberton doesn't do it alone. She and partner Shadi Ramey, chef and co-owner of Kalyani Conscious Explorations, planned every detail from mood lights to the palate-pleasing Ayurvedic cuisine. The event unfolded in the quiet mountain town of Estes Park, Colo., with its scant population of just under 6,000. The quaint cabins juxtaposed against the beauty of the Rocky Mountains fused splendor and peace into one picturesque weekend.

Glowing smiles peeked out from the corners of their lips as these students and teachers relished the freedom of creating their own unique movements. Many confessed that Nia helps them claim a centeredness—a way of getting back into their bodies regardless of injury, size, shape or age.

Pemberton said her passion is simple. "I love helping people find connection between body, mind and spirit, and seeing and feeling their happiness when they discover that simply tapping into the dance of Nia brings them to this place of pleasure and joy!" Footwork comes naturally to Pemberton. Watch her graceful moves and your jaw will drop as you try to imitate her fluidity.

What helps her deliver top-notch instruction is her ability to feel the rhythm and break it down, she said. Having grown up

with musicians, Pemberton was immersed in music from an early age. "If you have a background in music, it will be easier to pick apart the beat and put your routine together," she said.

How It Got Started

New to Nia? The artful form of movement borrows from the eastern stretches of the globe. With its fusion of kicks, yoga poses and free-form motions, the sheer joy keeps everyone moving.

In the early 80s, Debbie and Carlos Rosas were the two minds behind this ingenious method of movement that single-handedly brought joy back into moving. "We were exploring forms of movement. Back then, people thought we were crazy, it was in the height of the aerobics boom," Debbie Rosas said.

At the beginning, followers were few. The idea of stepping into a studio barefoot while looking to eastern influences for daily exercise seemed, well, strange. "Nobody understood what we were doing—we were charting a new path," Rosas said. But that did not stop this pioneering team from developing a way for people to enjoy their bodies in motion.

With about 2,000 certified teachers around the world, Nia has caught on. But it certainly did not hit the mainstream overnight. Instead, it inched into gyms and dance studios across the U.S. and the world. "I think it has grown slowly and organically and that has lasting power; the roots are deep," Rosas added.

Reach Inside for Your Strengths

Great teachers are gifted with a passion

and excitement about their craft. Sharing the gift with others is what they do best. Keenly aware of their impact, good instructors know it's their job to guide students along their path—whether it's for better health, inner beauty, fitness or fulfillment.

Rosas said this deep understanding doesn't come from a book, but rather a lifestyle. When the instructors fully embrace the teaching, it propels them forward. "It's a way of being in the body—the more successful teachers practice Nia in their life as well as at the gym," Rosas said.

Fitness professionals drawn to this industry wear an impressive list of credentials, certifications and specialities, perhaps as diverse as their fitness wardrobes. That means some are teaching a Spinning® class on Monday, yoga by Wednesday and kickboxing by Friday. Nia classes fall in-between.

Finding a focus requires creating one. Pemberton may start a class focused on the lower back or the knee, for example. Rosas said doing so helps bring awareness to specific body parts. Nia instructors are trained beyond basic Anatomy 101. The practice requires knowledge of the body's operating instructions. Knees bend up and down but not from left to right. Twisting knees awkwardly puts unnecessary stress on the joint and can cause injury.

Ask the body to move in a way that it cannot and it will likely revolt. Enjoy the body for its joyous capabilities, revere it for the limitations. "We look at the body and the structure. We say bones talk to us. Based on your size, your design, how should I be using you?" Rosas asked. She could not



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emphasize enough the importance of understanding how the body works. "Developing a relationship with the body is first and foremost," Rosas said. "Look at the body and how it's designed; create a moving conversation with the body."

Details Matter

A loud bass that rattles the walls, songs barely audible or a faulty mic—surely such equipment breaks down. And such minor details can sour a class instantly. Pemberton goes the extra mile to sync up the room. She makes it look and sound just right, from floor to ceiling. These steps ensure the acoustics will suit the entire class. "Sometimes the [music] vibration can influence the dance more," said Pemberton as she grabbed her iPod sound system for the next class.

And some surprises spice it up. "In Nia, you are teaching on the fly," said Pemberton. As she mimicked her arm moves she continued, "four more of these, two more of those, and a 'yah.' Because you are cuing people, you have to be four beats ahead of the music, track what you're doing and what they're [class] doing." Pemberton said, "You wait for the information to come to you."

But sometimes she simply waits to see what will happen next. Pemberton has grown more comfortable trusting in happenstance.

Rita Olsen is no ordinary instructor. She was the first to bring Nia to her state. "I feel like a pioneer woman on the prairie, bringing Nia to North Dakota, but it feels right," she said. A registered nurse of 35 years, Olsen is passionate about helping people

along their healing journey; Nia is just one more tool in her medical bag. "The beauty of [teaching] Nia is creating the safe space... in which the student can explore their range of movement, emotion and change that's possible to them," Olsen said.

Becoming an instructor was a dream for Olsen. She had a deep appreciation for theater and the arts as a youngster, but a successful nursing career put her love for dance on the backburner. Then it all changed in the fall of 2008 when she took the plunge and became Nia-certified. And she has no regrets. With a strong healing thread infused in Nia, Olsen said her nursing background only fortifies her ability to instruct.

Nia offers fertile ground for Olsen to continue exploring ways to help students find and harness inner strength. "When we begin to dance with letting go of the damaging patterns in our life and replacing them with self-acceptance and approval, our lives and the lives of those around us will experience the positive change," Olsen said.

Marti Harris knows how to engage her students—hearts start pumping and bodies brace themselves for some serious calorie burnin' fun. Harris attended the retreat as a participant but the 78 year old also teaches just about any class from weight training to Pilates. Give this fit chick a glance and you will surely learn a few cool dance steps.

Communication skills help Harris stay focused from beginning to end. She does it with "good eye contact and a presence," she said. Harris keeps her clients' needs in mind when teaching: "You have to make

your classes and your clientele feel like they are the most important thing; that they are essential."

Pemberton agrees and constantly checks in. "You have to know—is my class getting it? How can I shift the energy so that the class is engaged?" Pemberton's job almost requires two brains to monitor the feedback from the room. "I'm constantly oscillating my attention between myself and the group, and I'm using what I'm feeling as input and then tracking facial expressions, their emotions and the tempo," she said. Harris feels it's important that you really know your students. "Meet the needs of varying personalities and know what the class expectation is," Harris said. Knowing her students personally helps Harris bring out the best inside the studio and out.

Hit with illness or injury? Harris is on it—first to send out cheerful well wishes, and a meal if you're lucky. But taking the reins on the dance floor requires a balance of skills. According to Harris, "Good leadership qualities can get the room to rumble." **AF**

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