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# Arts & Entertainment



Longtime belly dancer Diane Bangerter shows one of her moves at Dance Elite, where she teaches.

Photo by GRAHAM PAINE

## Belly dancing great stress reliever: teacher

By **STEPHANIE THIESSEN**  
*The Champion*

**D**iane Bangerter's greatest compliments as a belly dancer came when she was performing years ago at restaurants and was asked by Middle Eastern men and women what part of the Middle East she was from.

In fact, Ms Bangerter isn't Middle Eastern at all — but you'd never know it by watching her execute the trademark smooth, fluid motions of belly dancing.

"It looks easy, but it's not as easy as it looks," Ms Bangerter said.

Four months ago, Ms Bangerter began instructing at Dance Elite on Nipissing Road, teaching women of all ages how to practice the ancient art form. Each class lasts one hour and 15 minutes, and runs weekly for 10 weeks.

Ms Bangerter began taking belly dancing classes in 1977 and participated in as many workshops as she could before she began performing in Toronto for a year. Then she decided to teach.

She first taught out of her Milton basement stu-

dio, but then left town. About five years ago she returned, and caught the teaching bug once again.

The Arabic name for belly dancing is 'Raqs Sharqi', which in English means 'Dance of the East'. Today, enthusiasts term it Dance Oriental.

Movements in the dance are natural to a woman's bone and muscle structure, Ms Bangerter said, and they emanate from the torso, rather than the legs and feet. "It often isolates different parts of the body, moving independently in sensuous patterns," she explained, adding wearing the often-exotic costumes is part of the thrill.

The many styles of belly dancing can range from ethnic to almost cabaret-like.

Belly dancing is often misunderstood, and Ms Bangerter said she hopes to shed some light on what experts say is the oldest form of dance.

"There has been for many years a stereotypical attitude. I've always been focused on trying to change that attitude by showing what a beautiful art form it is," she said.

One of the biggest misconceptions is that belly dancing was traditionally done to entertain men. In fact, women historically danced for other women at parties to prepare brides-to-be for marriage.

Belly dancing can be enjoyed by women of any age, Ms Bangerter said, adding she has women in

their twenties in her classes as well as seniors. The dance is easy on the joints, and Ms Bangerter was quick to point out it doesn't matter if students have two left feet.

There are many benefits to belly dancing, she said. First, there's the exercise component, which Ms Bangerter said provides a great cardiovascular workout designed to strengthen muscles and increase flexibility.

But that's just the tip of the iceberg. There's also the sheer enjoyment of it, as well as it being a spiritual activity and an outlet for expressing creativity. Increased self confidence is another benefit. There are often students who choose at first not to bare their midriffs, who — by the end — go for it, Ms Bangerter said. She added the dancing isn't about women having the 'ideal' body type, but about appreciating the bodies they do have.

Belly dancing is also a stress reliever, Ms Bangerter said.

"When I pour my mental energy into this ancient dance form, my daily troubles seem miles away. I leave refreshed, ready to take on the world."

For more information on classes, call (905) 878-2410.

Stephanie Thiessen can be reached at [sthiessen@miltoncanadianchampion.com](mailto:sthiessen@miltoncanadianchampion.com).



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