

## Nia combines martial arts, dance and yoga



Instructor Lola Manekin, right, of Hampden leads a Nia class at Baltimore Yoga Village in Mt. Washington. (Jen Rynda / Baltimore Sun Media Group)

**By Kit Waskom Pollard,**  
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**I**n a midsize Mount Washington yoga studio, acupuncturist and exercise instructor Lola Manekin calls out over a thumping beat and Native American chants, imploring the class in front of her to “channel your ancestors!” With her hips shaking and arms moving to the beat, Manekin is fierce and graceful.

She’s teaching Nia, an exercise approach founded in 1983 by a California couple, Debbie Rosas and Carlos AyaRosas. Nia stands for “neuromuscular integrative action,” though that name sounds more scientific than the free-flowing class feels. A combination of martial arts, dance and “healing arts” like yoga keep the class interesting — and bring on the sweat.

Surrounded by music and gyrating women, I doubt that my Irish forebears have gifted me with as much natural range of hip motion as Manekin’s Brazilian relatives gave her, but I give it a shot anyway. And it is fun.

The next hour flew by as Manekin led the class through a series of routines, which included everything from the kicking and punching of martial arts to free-form dancing to stretches that would feel familiar to any yoga

aficionado.

“We start slowly, and little by little it gets more intense,” says Manekin. “But it’s so gentle. At the end of class you’re drenched with sweat, and you don’t know how it happened.”

Manekin notes that Nia is popular with a wide range of people — it’s appropriate for all ages and body types. In the three-and-a-half years since she began teaching the discipline in Baltimore, she’s developed a following of (mostly) women who appreciate her energy and holistic approach to exercise.

“I’m a psychology professor at Loyola and am always talking about the mind-body connection,” says Adanna Johnson-Evans, a Remington resident who has been taking Nia classes for three years. During class, “I unwind, reconnect and set intentions,” she says.

But the class is not all serious and cerebral. Midsession, Manekin instructs the group to partner up and bump hips; everyone laughs as they go for it.

By the end of the class, the group is still smiling — and sweating. “It’s an awesome workout — and doesn’t hurt!” says Sherrell Savage of Harwood, a two-year Nia veteran. “Listen to your body as you go. You don’t have to force it, and you still get a great workout.”

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