

## Practitioner Spotlight:

# Nia™ Teacher Robin Okun

By Sarah Newland



Photo by Linda Lawson

Robin Okun, MSW

Last summer, at The Tree of Life opening party in Chelsea, I ran into a woman I've known from around town for over ten years. I hadn't seen her in quite a long time, but she is a friend of a friend and I had always liked her. I recognized her immediately, but she looked somehow very different. She was *glowing*. When I asked her what had changed in her life, she had one enthusiastic word for me: "Nia!" The woman was Robin Okun, and she went on to tell me how she had recently become a certified Nia teacher and how much it had entirely changed her life. I could clearly see it. When Robin emailed a few weeks later to invite me to try one of her classes, I was intrigued and interested to learn more about this fairly new but increasingly popular movement form.

What is Nia\*, anyway? Before I attended Robin's class, I asked several people this question and they all came up with different answers. Nia was described as meditational movement, yoga combined with tai chi and dance, aerobics without shoes, free expression of your body set to music... It left me wondering. Even the phrase from which "Nia" is derived: neuromuscular integrative action. Huh? But I decided to visit Robin's class before I read about it in order to carry less preconceived notions with me. I just wanted to experience it and, as is commonly voiced about Nia, "It's like chocolate. You can't describe it. You have to taste it."

There was one challenge to attending any class for me, and that was/is my infant son, whom I take to work and basically everywhere else 24 hours per day. He is very good and agreeable, but I was concerned I wouldn't be able to fully get a sense of Robin's class. She reassured me it was no problem and that I should just come. She said the

beauty of Nia is that it allows you to experience the movement in whatever ways you can in the moment, limitations and all. She said I could even simply watch. So I arrived on Halloween morning, greeted very warmly by Robin and her students, and settled into a chair at the back.

To begin her classes, Robin takes a quiet moment to set an intention, inviting her students to consider a specific thought or idea (or not if they choose not to). I believe this may be unique to Robin's classes, inspired by her 20 years experience as a social worker. The metaphor for this day was Halloween and the masks we choose to put on - masks of different energies, such as anger, fear, confidence, etc. - and how they can manifest and change in our lives, as well as how our body can express them. Then she started the music, and we began. The music itself is very energizing, varied, and contemporary - some with a strong beat while others are more light and ethereal. Robin leads the movement at the front of the class with mostly prescribed or choreographed steps combined with periods of "free" dance in which you can choose how to move and express yourself with the music. It didn't take me long to stand and participate, baby Liam in my arms. (It also didn't take him long to fall asleep, lulled by the rhythm of the movement.) The dance itself also varies, but what makes the class unique is that you can alter any of the movements to suit your needs at the time - big or small movements, energetic or sensual. Robin encourages you to listen to your body, always, and let it tell you what it needs. Nia is about finding that which gives your body pleasure through movement, which is different for everyone. So, although I could use my arms only for holding Liam, I could still fully participate in the class. Individual differences can be completely accommodated.

To put it very simply, *I loved it*. I love to dance and move, and I loved her choice of music (except maybe the two Halloween-inspired songs). Robin is a warm, genuine person, and a highly energized, dynamic teacher. She moves effortlessly and gracefully, and is easy to follow. Even at my first class, I was able to do all the movements and didn't feel left out or behind the other students. Plus, it was just so fun! Nia makes you sweat. It truly works your muscle groups from the specific movements Robin leads. But it doesn't feel like it. It's that fun, and the hour flies by. One of Robin's students and also certified Nia instructor Villabeth Taylor says, "There is a spiritual as well as a healing quality to Nia. It has the ability to bring me in touch with my 'inner spirit'. And it is FUN! No matter how I

feel when I walk into the class, I walk out with a big smile!" I had a lot of hesitation about trying Nia before the class, but I enjoyed all of it. When asked about this wonderful healing movement form, Robin said, "I wanted to do the Nia training if only for my personal health and healing. I blossomed inside and out at this training and felt very inspired to make this my life's work. I create an environment where participants love and accept and honor their bodies as they hold vision and send energy out to achieve their personal goals. I love Nia for so many reasons. It is exercise for mind, body, spirit, and emotions."

Developed over 20 years ago by Debbie Rosas and Carlos Rosas, Nia was meant to be a fusion fitness form that was less painful and more pleasurable, including barefoot aerobics, holistic and integrated fitness, wellness, personal growth, and education. Combining carefully selected movements and concepts from yoga, tai chi, taekwon do, aikido, jazz, and modern dance, Nia classes offer total body cardiovascular conditioning and cross-training. Nia engages the spirit, allowing for more self-awareness and play. It encourages inner exploration and guides students to move through their own uniquely created space. It is guided by the "Pleasure Principle": if the body feels good, accepted, and loved, it will naturally become stronger and heal. To learn more about Nia, read *The Nia Technique* by Debbie Rosas and Carlos Rosas, published by Broadway Books.

Robin offers classes in the morning at The Peaceful Dragon Studio on Pauline Blvd. The cost of classes is \$50 per month for one class per week, \$100 for two classes per week or \$150 for unlimited monthly classes. The drop-in fee is \$15. As a special offer during the first two weeks in January, Robin invites anyone to come and try her class for free! She can be reached at (734)395-2624 or [mindfullmovement@gmail.com](mailto:mindfullmovement@gmail.com). If you feel your mind, body and spirit are inseparable, and if you seek exercise that allows you to connect with your body in a mindful way and have fun, I encourage you to try Nia!

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Robin Okun's Nia™ classes are offered at the Peaceful Dragon Studio.