

Decatur Parks and Recreation is hosting a new program which started January 30, Belly Dancing, led by instructor Joyce O'Neal. Joyce conducts her classes with an easy-going and engaging personality presenting the basics of belly dancing, the spirit of the art and the technical aspects all framed with enjoyment, humor, flair and a sincere devotion to each person in attendance! [Classes](#) are offered each Monday at the [Aquadome Recreation Center](#) from 6 to 7 pm. We visited with Joyce Monday, February 20, for an insightful look at this ancient art.

How old is the art of belly dancing?

Belly dancing is as old as humanity. Humans were expressing themselves through body movements long before they developed communicating verbally. Actually, dancing, in all its forms, is an expression of words the mind seeks to express.



How did you become attracted to belly dancing and why?

My genealogy is traced to Armenia, so it's already in my blood, so-to-speak. But early-on I was interested in the art of dance and took classes beyond high school. When I lived in Hawaii, the hula dance became a fascination which eventually worked its way toward what is called belly dancing. When I returned to the mainland I began a more intensive study of Middle East dance, which Westerners know as belly dancing. I toured with a few dance troupes, working my way into professional instruction.

How has belly dancing changed since you first started?

This style varies from culture-to-culture, as it isn't an identity only within Middle Eastern societies. It can be found in the Mediterranean, Asia and around the world. Westerners have applied the term, "belly dancing." When I first started it had little more than a, so-to-speak, side show appeal, a curiosity. Westerners, especially, are becoming more aware of this style which, interestingly, is a blend or culmination of all areas of a culture, a so-called multi-cultural phenomenon.



Do you have a philosophy of belly dancing?

Relax. Enjoy. Have fun. Allow movements to come in a natural and fluid manner. It is a unique form of relaxation and fitness for the mind as well as the body.

What is your dance style?

My dance style is primarily Egyptian although it is a combination of ethnic movements as well, particularly African. I appreciate how the movements can relay the story of a culture.

How long did you study before you became an instructor? And did you study under anyone in particular?

Two to three years. I was a student of [Simones Seventh Veil Dance Company](#).

How have you evolved as a dancer?

When I was younger I was enthusiastic about performing but now I feel my maturity as a dancer and a person has moved past performance to concentrate more on the many variables of instruction.

Is there a universal vocabulary for movements?

Fluid and sharp flowing or transitioning naturally into one another. It's unique how the presentation can begin slow and then transition into something fast and beautiful.

**What advice would you offer for one starting out in belly dancing as a hobby or business?**

Be consistent, as with any serious endeavor. Give it a chance to become a unique part of your life's expression. Try not to become discouraged, and attend as many classes as you can.

What are the basic pieces of a belly dancers outfit or wardrobe?

Hip scarf, veil, and finger cymbals.

What are the meanings behind the different pieces of equipment?

The hip scarf is meant to emphasize or accentuate the movements of the hips. The veil highlights spinning movements. The finger cymbals give support to the beat of the music and a rhythm to connect the music and the dancer.

Are there special shoes or other equipment?

Belly dancing is done bare foot, which allows for best control of shifting weight and grounding when pivoting.

Do you make your own costumes?

I have made some of my own costumes as well as purchasing beautiful accessories.



What are the benefits of belly dancing?

Aside from the physical benefits of toning muscles, increasing flexibility, weight loss, there is an inner peace which comes from belly dancing. Oriental cultures have an interesting physical regimen, as do those who practice yoga. Belly dancing provides a unique connection with an interior intimacy of one's own feelings, and is not, as some Westerners view, an erotic display for the visual pleasure of others. It also builds self-confidence.

Whom do you consider the greatest modern-day belly dancer?

[Martha Graham](#), without a doubt. Her dance interpretations were marvelous and crossed all cultural boundaries.

You mentioned your Armenian heritage. How did your family come to the United States?

My father came to America from Armenia through Ellis Island. He, along with so many others of that generation saw America as a land of opportunity. He eventually relocated to California where he met my mother, an American, who had moved to California from Hartselle, after graduation from Auburn University.

Are there others in your family who belly dance?

My mother, a Methodist, took classes as part of a church group, along with her participation in the book club and women's group.

How long have you lived in Alabama?

I relocated to Alabama from California one year ago to be with my aging mother who resides in Hartselle. I am a massage therapist at [The French Door](#) here in Decatur. I also enjoy the art of finger painting and can be contacted at frameablefingerpaintingsbyjoyce@yahoo.com or call 760-604-1884. The transition from California to Alabama was easy because I made frequent trips here to visit my grandparents on their farm and my exposure and experiences with that became a solid part of my heritage. I thoroughly enjoy living here in Alabama!

What is the eldest and youngest belly dancer you have taught?

I cannot recall the age of the eldest. It's important to note that there are no age boundaries on learning to belly dance, although I'd prefer children to start at age twelve or thirteen.

Internet Links

[All About Belly Dancing](#)

[Learn to Belly Dance](#)

[IAMED](#)

[Belly Dance](#)

[Belly Dance Superstars](#)