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Zohar Tells Seniors, 'Put Your Belly Into It!'

By A.J. McCABE

In the beginning, they usually sit cross-armed, casting a cynical eye at the female dancers adorned in shimmering, colorful costumes and veils. But by the end of the performance, most of the residents of the nursing homes Zohar and her dancers visit are up dancing vigorously, wide smiles beaming from their faces.

Zohar performs and teaches the ancient art of belly dancing, or as it is more accurately described, "the sacred dance of the Goddess."

The difference? In the old paradigm, belly dancing was seductive, sinful, improper, an exploitative dance performed for the pleasure of men. In the new paradigm, the sacred dance is graceful, tasteful, empowering and self actualizing, she explained.

Zohar has performed nationally and internationally for more than 16 years. One of her first shows, more than a decade and a half ago, was at a nursing home, "I still have the letter they sent thanking me," Zohar said from her Katonah studio/office.

And she has been performing shows in nursing homes ever since.

Nursing homes originally hired Zohar and her dancers to provide a colorful and entertaining show for their residents. But Zohar has been successful in bringing her predominantly female audiences to another, deeper level during her performances.

The dance, a middle eastern tradition that dates back thousands of years, empowers women to focus on their inner beauty and wisdom. In ancient societies, older woman or "crones" were considered wise. They were revered and respected, not suppressed and cast off, she said.

"The dance helps to reawaken that sense of self," Zohar explained. Women in her audiences are encouraged to participate in the dance. "They are given permission to feel free to celebrate life...to feel joy, love and acceptance."

Zohar performs to a variety of traditional Middle Eastern songs. Movements are connected with the elements: earth, air wind and fire. Undulating hand movements represent waves in the water; long graceful arm movements represent the air, the shimmy, or vibration of the hips, rep-



Residents of Brandywine Nursing Home in Briarcliff Manor became rejuvenated as they participated in the ancient art of belly dancing, led by Zohar.

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resents fire; and the rhythmic beating of the tambourine represents earth's own pulse.

And, the movements can be adapted to residents of nursing or assisted living facilities that may be confined to a wheelchair — so everyone can participate — and they usually do, she said.

"They become so enlivened and happy," she continued. "They're beaming and full of energy." After the performance, women come to her "with tears in their eyes...they hug me and thank me. I don't know what it is that actually happens to create this reaction but it is really quite phenomenal."

She not only intends to find out,

she plans on finding out by compiling empirical, scientific data.

Zohar is often accompanied to performances with her dance students — women who come from all walks of life and hold a variety of professions including a hospital administrator, nurse, radiologist and a college professor.

She has asked her students to help her prepare a questionnaire and begin a study that would, over the course of a period of time, compile data on the effects of the dance. The scientific study would chart the effects of performing the dance on women's health, emotions and energy levels.

Belly dancing is not only uplifting, beautiful and powerful but it appeals to women because it is so feminine, Zohar said. "It is a celebration for women, by women."

For information call Zohar at 232-3451.



When Zohar first arrives, few of the seniors she teaches seem interested. By the time she leaves, they can't wait for her return.