

Zoom in on Zumba

MAGGIE DOWNS • THE DESERT SUN • APRIL 1, 2010

Lee Miller never expected to become a dance instructor.



Lee Miller (left) dances during a Zumba class in Palm Springs. “I love to dance, but I’m not a dancer. And I love to exercise, but I’m not an exercise buff. This was something completely unexpected for me,” the 72-year-old Zumba instructor said. (Jay Calderon The Desert Sun)

The 72-year-old is the mother of six children and grandmother to eight. Until 2002, she had a private psychotherapy practice and a rehabilitation counseling service. She had no background in exercise instruction or dance. “I love to dance, but I’m not a dancer. And I love to exercise, but I’m not an exercise buff,” she says. “This was something completely unexpected for me.” Then she discovered Zumba — and she had no idea how much it would affect her life. The workout fuses Latin dance with aerobics with a fun atmosphere. (The program’s tagline is “Ditch the workout. Join the party!”) Since its inception by Colombian dancer and choreographer Alberto “Beto” Perez in the 1990s, Zumba has caught like wildfire across the United States. There are even some offshoot programs, like Zumba Toning, which adds strength training through the use of 1

In the Coachella Valley, there are more than 80 Zumba classes of all kinds, happening everywhere from school gyms to church basements.

Miller quickly fell in love with the classes. “I feel so free. My body feels so good when it’s moving,” she says. “I actually look forward to coming to class.” Just a few short months after starting classes, Miller decided to become a Zumba instructor and started training with Dr. Lorrie Lauer at the Palm Springs Leisure Center dance studio.

“When I first started, I couldn’t get through a class without sitting down. I was deconditioned, and I was 15 pounds heavier than I am now,” Miller says. “But I loved it so much that I approached Lorrie and said, ‘Am I foolish for wanting to become a Zumba teacher?’”

After she completed the certification process in October, Miller became the oldest Zumba instructor in the nation.

Right after Miller received her certification, she put together her own Zumba Gold program, which is designed for older adults or beginning exercisers.



Zumba instructor Lee Miller (right) dances with one of the residents of A&D Eldercare in Palm Springs. “I absolutely love the feeling I get from working in the Alzheimer’s facility,” Miller said. “I walk away feeling so wonderful after seeing the smiles on everyone’s faces.” (Jay Calderon The Desert Sun)

She created a chair class that has been modified to suit the special needs of people with limited range of motion, diminished cognitive skills, impaired senses or other limitations. Currently, Miller instructs people with Alzheimer's Disease at A&D Eldercare, a senior care facility in Palm Springs. “I grab the person's hands, and I can feel them starting to move,” she says. “The music sparks a memory that's in their bodies.”

The effects of dance on cognitive health are well-documented. A 21-year study, published in the New England Journal of Medicine, found that dancing can reduce the risk of Alzheimer's and other forms of dementia. The theory is that remembering steps engages the participant's mind and requires concentration and focus.

“I absolutely love the feeling I get from working in the Alzheimer's facility. I walk away feeling so wonderful after seeing the smiles on everyone's faces,” Miller says. “If I had to have a second career, this is a good one.”



Lee Miller engages one of the residents of A&D Eldercare in Palm Springs during a Zumba class. Miller created a Zumba chair class that has been modified to suit the special needs of people with limited range of motion, diminished cognitive skills, impaired senses or other limitations.
