



Belly-dancing to give animals a fair shake

By Amanda McGregor
STAFF WRITER

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From gothic to hula to sword dancing, there will be a bevy of belly dancers in Salem come Sunday.

The North Shore Chapter of the Northeast Belly Dance Association is hosting a belly-dance showcase to benefit the Northeast Animal Shelter.

"We all love animals, and we thought it was a really great cause," said Memie Watson of Beverly, a belly-dance instructor and coordinator of the North Shore Chapter.

Salem residents Amelia Kurpeski and Libby Rowe will be among two dozen performers at the showcase. They began taking lessons with Watson a little over a year ago at the Dance Class studio on Essex Street in Salem.

"It's a great, personal thing to do for yourself," Rowe said, "and it's a wonderful community that I had no idea existed. There is a whole world of belly dancers out there.

"It's a cool thing to do," she said. "I get a little pride when I say, 'I'm a belly dancer.'"

The "Spring Equinox Belly Dance Showcase" is scheduled for 2 p.m. at Old Town Hall in Salem.

Q&A with Memie Watson:

How long have you been a belly dancer?

Since the late '80s. I was at a party and I saw a friend of mine doing all these snaky movements with her hands and arms, and I said, "What are you doing?" So I found a teacher here at this school (Dance Class).

Why belly-dance?

It empowers you. It makes you feel good about yourself. Women come in who are very large and say, "I'll never show my belly," then weeks later they're in half-tops because they feel so good about themselves.

How do you belly-dance?

It's just learning it inside and out: the culture, dissecting the music, the ins and outs of the choreography, and knowing the beats because it's totally different.

Origins of belly-dancing?

It dates back more than 5,000 years. It was dancing for women, by women. It helped with fertility and childbirth. The images of women dancing for sultans is all Hollywood. That's what you see on TV, but really they danced for other women.

Are belly dancers still only women?

No, it's for all ages, sizes, shapes, women and men. I've had one male student who is a fire spinner — he dances with fire. The teacher I learned from is in her 70s.

Is belly-dancing good exercise?

It can burn 300 calories an hour. People say they're a lot more sore when they first come back from belly dance than the gym. You're working all these muscles that you isolate.

Are there popular belly-dance moves?

A big move is the "snake" or "sidewinder," where you're undulating sideways like a snake. Everybody loves the shimmys. A figure eight is when you make the shape of an eight with your hips.

What kind of music do you dance to?

It depends. Classical Egyptian, Middle Eastern, Egyptian pop, Turkish, Lebanese, and some of the dances are more modern. There are so many different styles of belly dance.

Are there misconceptions about belly-dancing?

That it's only about the belly — it's more than that. It's head to toe: meditating, spiritual, muscle control, movement. And it's sensual, not sexual.

Do people confuse the two?

Some people think of stripping, and that has nothing to do with it. We are asked to perform at many events. What we don't do is bachelor parties, it says on the Web site: will not perform, don't even ask.

What are the belly-dance costumes like?

Gorgeous. A lot of dancers create their own costumes. The top-quality professional ones can cost \$1,000 per costume.

Have you ever taught pregnant women?

Yes, we've had women do it up until the week before they gave birth, and they said they had really easy childbirths. There are specialized pregnant-belly-dancing teachers.

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Do you need to be a good dancer in order to belly-dance?

Everyone is stiff when they first start. There is no competition in class; I tell my students, "Leave your egos at the door."

Want to go?

What: Spring Equinox Belly Dance Showcase to benefit the Northeast Animal Shelter

When: Sunday, 2 p.m.

Where: Old Town Hall, 32 Derby Square, Salem

Cost: \$10 in advance or \$15 at the door

Information: Call Memie at 978-790-1963 or e-mail winddancer@comcast.net

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