

Dancers from page C1

the artistic and cultural aspects of the dance, which creates more freedom for personal expression. Not to say that discipline isn't important, because it certainly is. But children also need to be accepted for who they are as individuals, not merely for their accomplishments alone."

Boukrra also teaches the dance to help build self-esteem in her dancers.

"This is especially true for young girls, so that they develop self-confidence and a positive body image early on in life, she said. "The need for social conformance and acceptance starts at a very early age. Young students develop a perception that a dancer ought to be thin — even to the point of malnutrition. But with belly dance, there is no such thing as an ideal body type. Positive body image is an important virtue for young ladies to learn, and hopefully, I can use that aspect of the dance to help make a difference."

Fun

The dance, she said brings people together of all ages. The Arabic music, upbeat in nature, is fun for the children who are motivated by happiness.

They're also attracted to the

colorful and eclectic costumes, and noise-makers such as finger cymbals and coin belts. Part of the children's classes are spent making jewelry and decorative plates, which the girls love.

"Together, music and dance create a universal language which enables us to better understand other cultures. For young children, cultural diversity is another important benefit they can derive from their lessons.

Whether it's intriguing belly rolls, isolated hip shimmies, elegant "snake" arms, or mesmerizing body waves, traditional and modern forms of "Oriental" belly dancing are alive worldwide.

Vanessa Vogler, a Shawaza member and student of Boukrra, discovered personal expression and femininity through belly dancing with her sister Paula Vogler. Ironically, Boukrra, who has danced professionally for eight years, also discovered the dance along with her sister.

Boukrra, also a drummer, teaches students several styles of belly dance including veil and zil (cinnamon) dances. Shawaza recently performed Boukrra's own zil composition and dance at the BellyJam dance convention in Cincinnati, a prestigious

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event for "Oriental" dancers.

Boukrra and her students in Shawaza have formed a bond of encouragement and support — and that touches the Vogler sisters.

"The tribe is very close. We all enjoy dancing together as well as the social company. I love the new friends I've made," said Paula Vogler. "We all learn through each other."

Dispelling myths

While belly dancing is exotic, Shawaza is adamant to break myths that it's exotic. Boukrra works to bring tradition back to the stage with elaborate costumes, creativity and ethnic music.

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inated as a birth ritual in Mesopotamia. There, the dance was performed by temple priestesses as a sacred, highly esteemed ritual to celebrate the magic of birth. As civilizations evolved, so did religious beliefs and practices. The birth ritual then endured as a cultural religion and has become a common form of entertainment for special occasions in America and overseas, Boukrra explained.

The term "belly dance" was coined in 1893 by promoters of the World Fair in Chicago where America's first Oriental, or Middle Eastern, dance was performed. Today Boukrra is dedicated to promoting Middle Eastern dance and culture in the metro-Detroit area.

The interest in Middle Eastern dance and culture is strong in

the area, Boukrra said, but there aren't many instructors available. At the International Women's Show in Novi this year, the Navel Academy promoted Middle Eastern dance and culture to women of Wayne, Oakland and Washtenaw Counties.

"The number one thing we heard from visitors at our booth was that they wanted to take lessons for years, and could never find an instructor. Our presence there was very significant for those communities throughout the state where Middle Eastern dance was previously not accessible."

Shawaza also brings the dance to many local communities through public performances, which are free to the audience. Recent appearances include the Westland Public Library, Borders Books & Music stores, and Gilda's Club.

Dancing for improved health

"Even pregnant women benefit from the dance," Boukrra said. "Mothers who belly dance are known to experience less difficulty during labor and have a faster recovery."

Student dancer Katherine Vincent, of Berkley, is currently

pregnant and has been encouraged by fellow Shawaza members to dance throughout her pregnancy. Part of that, she appreciates the dance as her heritage.

Exercise

"It's a good form of exercise and it's very beautiful," Vincent said.

For seniors or women described as obese the dance is beneficial because it isn't aerobic but tones muscles and builds stamina, Boukrra said. Since it's low-impact, there's little risk of injury.

And most students aren't Middle Eastern. Boukrra says she enjoys instructing American students and teaching about Middle Eastern culture, because students then learn that many common perceptions of Middle Eastern people are untrue.

"Cedena is our mentor. We look for approval from her all the time and we all fight for her attention," Vanessa Vogler laughed. "She is so encouraging. The chemistry of all us together is something unheard of for a group of people. I love this bunch of women."

And in Shawaza and the world of belly dance, it's an art and friendship open to all women.

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