

Awakening the senses with pole dancing

by Janis Gibson

Women who are looking to vary their exercise routines, to do something different, may want to consider pole dancing, as taught by Joni Lowe of Positive Energy Dance for Women.

Joni offers several types of classes at various locations, including Everywoman's Spirit in Ridgefield. One class emphasizes a mind-body-spirit connection, whereas women-only pole-dance parties are focused on spirited fun.

A former aerobics instructor, Joni worked in the technology fields of documentation, business analysis and training before she had her two children, now six and seven. As she was watching Oprah one afternoon, her life was changed.

"It was November 2003," Joni recalled, "and she did a show on finding your inner sexpot, which included a segment on pole dancing. I loved the grace and strength the women showed, and they were doing it in a way that was not naughty, but sensual. And it hit me how much I had enjoyed dancing before I had children, and how long it had been since I moved that way."

"I didn't realize what I was missing until that day," she continued. "In having my children, for more than three years I didn't own my body. I was pregnant, nursed for a year, was pregnant and nursed again. I was most comfortable wearing my husband's oversized clothes. The show touched me, reminded me of how much my husband and I had loved going out dancing when we were dating. Watching that show made me want to dance again, to reawaken and reclaim my body. And as I started dancing in my own house, feeling energized, I realized I could help teach others to feel the same way."

Joni began a year-long exploratory and training journey that took her to pole-dancing classes in New York City, Los Angeles, San Francisco and Vancouver. She also took classes to renew her AFAA certification so she could teach, and blended what she'd learned in with her own style. Joni's exercise classes are designed to help women become more aware of and comfortable with their bodies and sensuality, as well as becoming more fit. "I want to help women feel it is OK to move their bodies in a sensual way without embarrassment, to embrace their sexy."

To get a real sense of her classes, Joni invited me to bring several friends to a sample class at Everywoman's Spirit. She likes the privacy available at its studio since she will not teach in a space where others can watch. She generally keeps the lighting dim, and has even conducted classes by candlelight. Before beginning, we were required to sign the usual facility and instructor liability waivers – "... I understand I can hurt myself doing this..."

Joni's objective is to celebrate women, and help them feel comfortable celebrating themselves, leaving class feeling empowered and sexy. As part of this, she makes you aware of all your senses – see this, feel that – as she instructs. Each class is 90 minutes and she generally teaches in six-week segments. She also offers a single two-hour Sensual Pole Dancing workshop, a teaser where women can learn what the classes are all about without committing to a six-week session. She also teaches sequential sessions – Sensual Pole Dancing I, II and III – as well as offering private instruction on an hourly basis.

The class begins with a 30- to 40-minute warm-up that involves slow stretching and bending to help strengthen your core and increase flexibility and balance. Many of the movements are similar to what you would experience in a Pilates class. Others are definitely not. As part of sensual awareness, while lying on mats we were instructed to run our fingers through our hair, gently massage our scalps and caress all the curves of our bodies, beginning at the back of the head to the neck, to where neck meets shoulders, then continuing on down.

The second portion of the class involves working with the pole – doing some stretches, learning how best to grasp it to anchor ourselves for moving around it, and then attempting a couple of basic routines. As is usually inevitable, my friends and I got into the spirit – Joni's enthusiasm is contagious – and our walks to and around the pole turned into sashays, where we were laughing and teasing each other. And we laughed at ourselves when some of those initial spins around the pole, known as "the butterfly" – right hand holding overhead, right foot planted, left arm and leg extended – resulted in crash landings.



Joni Lowe offers Positive Energy Dance for Women.

A word about the poles – there is usually one per four women. In places like Everywoman's Spirit, where she teaches regularly, hooks to hold the poles are anchored in the ceiling, behind a movable ceiling tile. The poles are designed with a spring tension, similar to shower-curtain rods. In other places and private home, Joni uses padding on either end to secure the pole without marring the floor or ceiling. The poles come apart and can be transported in a large case. And yes, you can buy one to use in your own home.

As for the home parties – she averages three to six per month – they turned out differently than expected. "I thought I would be doing primarily bachelorette parties with young women," she said. "Instead, the parties are most popular with middle-aged women. While many are initially self-conscious, I open with a nonalcoholic toast to the pole and short demonstration. When they see me move, it gives them permission to move in the same way. Before too long, there is a whole lot of laughter and hip-swinging going on."

The parties last for two hours, and they usually involve eight to 10 women and one pole. As with the classes, the parties are women only, no one is allowed to watch, and there is no nudity.

As for those other frequently asked questions: No, Joni was never a dancer in a club; yes, her husband is very supportive of what she is doing, and her children are aware of what she does. "I explained it to them from the exercise perspective and answer their questions as they arise."

For more information about Positive Energy Dance for Women, visit www.PositiveEnergyDance.biz.