

# Joy to the World

Elaine Dunphy's "welderlies" are aging at their own pace, and having a ball while they're at it.

*By Linda Browne*

*In our social-media society,*

we tend to look at aging in a less than positive light. Just look at all the ads for anti-aging wrinkle cream, grey hair coverup, and all the other products that help hide any signs that you're eligible for the senior's discount. Thankfully, those attitudes are gradually changing and we're learning to embrace the process of getting older. As they say, age is just a number, and growing older is a privilege that not everyone gets to experience.

Aging is one thing. But aging well is another. And while so much focus is often placed on how we look on the outside, we sometimes neglect how we feel on the inside. Keeping active and moving plays such an important role in that.

Just ask Patricia Pike of Mount Pearl, NL. When she started to experience some health challenges some time ago, "I said OK, I got to do something to keep myself well," Patricia, 77, recalls.

She began exploring different paths to find her way back to wellness and, in 2017, attended her first Nia class with Elaine Dunphy of Nia on the Rock. "After the first class, I was sold on it," Patricia laughs. "It is so fun, and if you're having a bad day, you forget about your pain."

A movement practice that combines dance, martial arts, yoga and mindfulness, the Nia Technique was created in 1983 by American fitness trainers Debbie and Carlos Rosas. It was devised as an alternative to the "no pain, no gain" mantra of high-impact aerobics programs that were popular at the time.

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After retiring from corporate life in 2015, Elaine (who's been belly dancing since 2006) "stumbled" into a Nia class led by a visiting teacher. While "it wasn't even on my radar to do something like this," she says, it wasn't long before she was hooked. She travelled to Toronto, ON, to complete her instructor training and now spends her days showing others how to find joy and wellness through movement.

Speaking over the phone, Elaine's laugh rings through and her voice practically radiates joy. While she works with students of all ages, ranging from three to 103, the biggest source of her joy are those seniors, like Patricia, who she affectionately calls her "welderlies."

"They're my main love," she says. "I'm in front of about 120 to 140 welderlies a week, so I feel that I'm just so blessed to be able to help the senior population keep moving."

### Movement for Every Body

A typical Nia class with Elaine kicks off with a poem to set the right mood and intention. When the music starts and her students get moving and grooving, that's when the real fun begins. She also incorporates playfulness, which can include props like a parachute that her students take turns running beneath (a nod to schoolyard games and just the ticket for her young-at-heart welderlies).

Also woven into her classes is a brain fitness program called "Ageless Grace," created in the US by Nia

teacher Denise Medved. Consisting of 21 simple exercises, which include right- and left-brain activities, set to music, it's a workout for both body and brain, and helps create new neural pathways (think of the childhood challenge of patting your head and rubbing your stomach



simultaneously, and you get the idea). While the program is taught all over the world, Elaine is one of just two certified Ageless Grace instructors in Newfoundland and Labrador.

As one of her longest term welderlies, Patricia is having a ball. "We're doing yoga and tai chi, all these things... and people all of a sudden start feeling better and they don't realize what's happening," she says.

"You got to do a combination of things, no matter what age you are...



Elaine Dunphy (far right, in white) leads her welderlies through some moves at the St. John's Retired Citizens Association.

but the kind of things with Nia, the endurance, strength, the balancing, the flexibility – and it's doing it on a regular basis... I can't afford to give it up."

Elaine also strives to make her classes as inclusive and accessible as possible for her welderlies, pointing to her 103-year-old student as an example. "She used to do it with her lipstick on and her necklace and matching earrings, in her wheelchair. My class can be adapted to someone with mobility issues... if some seniors have walkers or whatever, they're

able to stay in their chair, or in their wheelchair, and still participate as much as they can," she says.

Recently, Elaine added waltzing to the end of her classes, which adds a whole other layer to the experience. "So I go to each of the ladies now and I put my arms out... and I can't even tell you how magical it is," she says. "Because some of them have lost their partners. One lady is in a walker, and I went over and put my arms out to her and she said, 'Oh, my husband and I used to do all these dances.' And I just stood with her

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**Elaine (centre) poses with members of her Monday Nia class.**

and we kind of went back and forth, and then I gave her a little bow and I said, 'Well, thank you for dancing with me.' Honest to God, I don't know how I got so lucky."

### Attitude of Gratitude

Elaine shares the joy of Nia and Ageless Grace through classes at seniors' homes and through organizations including the Association for the Arts in Mount Pearl, the St. John's Retired Citizens Association, Epilepsy Newfoundland and Labrador, and Manuels River. She's also brought Ageless Grace to events like the recent Bay Roberts Lions Club's Holiday Wellness Event. During the pandemic, she connected with her welllderlies online through Zoom from her home in Paradise.

St. John's resident Gerri Trainor, 74, has only been doing Ageless Grace for about a year – but that might fool some folks. She shares a story about a recent cruise she went on with a group of friends. They were hanging around the pool when she decided to do some Ageless Grace exercises. Her friends joined in. Then another curious passenger. And then another.

"So the next thing, we looked and there were three or four people around, men and women... and when it was finished, this gentleman said to me, 'You're hired by the cruise line.' [I] said 'No, we're not,'" Gerri recalls, laughing at the memory. "'We're just doing this to keep our bodies in motion.'"

Besides being great for the body and mind, Gerri says, the social aspect of the classes "is absolutely wonderful... You go once and it's amazing the number of people that you meet. And then you pull your friends in with you, and the next thing you know, you're saying, 'Okay, well, we got class tomorrow, so I'll pick you up.' And then, 'Oh, we'll go for coffee. Oh, no, let's go for lunch.'"

The program, she adds, also helps ease the mind that can run a mile a minute. "We worry about things that we shouldn't worry about, and we're thinking about what's going to happen [in] two weeks' time, which we have no control over. So going to these classes, you learn to deal with all this and how to say to yourself, 'OK, I have no control over this. I'm going to stay for today; tomorrow will look after itself.'"



**Elaine with her favourite welllderly, her mother Lorraine Gillespie.**

There's a certain *joie de vivre* that shines through Elaine's welllderlies. And while she has great affection for them all, her favourite is her mom, Lorraine Gillespie. She's been taking her daughter's classes since 2017. Now 82 years young, the Mount Pearl resident shows no signs of slowing down, squeezing her Thursday Nia class in between Wednesday's card game and Friday's darts.

"The older you get, the more you have to take care of yourself. And as long as I can walk and move and everything else, I intend to keep exercising because it certainly does help me... I'm gonna keep going as long as I can," she says. "And aside from that, the group is a lot of fun."

Elaine may not be a miracle worker, but to her welllderlies, she's the next best thing. And they're also teaching her a thing or two along the way.

"It is a privilege to engage daily with my welllderlies. They have become my extended family," Elaine says. "My welllderlies have shown me that aging gracefully is possible. I love having a front row seat with them on their life journey. They truly are dancing through life. They are my biggest joy!"

She adds, "I want to be them when I grow up!" 📧

*To learn more, visit "Ageless Grace on the Rock" and "Nia on the Rock" on Facebook.*

