

# Get your groove back with Nia workshop

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Valerie Sanchez dances with change. On a two-year trip around the world, she learned to embrace opinions, customs, and the way other cultures interact with movement, music, and community. Her main push for traveling was to broaden her horizons as a newly minted Nia fusion fitness instructor.

She had heard Nia was a global initiative and wanted to connect with the different teachers, practices, and classrooms worldwide.



**Valerie Sanchez will present a workshop on "A Gateway to Change," at the Capital Regional Medical Center on Tuesday which will show how Nia can provide stress relief.** TRAVIS SUTTON

Sanchez says the trip forever altered her relationship with material goods and money, waging war on her "gypsy soul versus her business side," as she had left the corporate sector to traverse countries like the Japan, the Czech Republic, Australia, and Malaysia. After landing back in Tallahassee, she discovered a way she could merge these distinct aspects of her life.

Her workshop, "A Gateway to Change," at the Capital Regional Medical Center on Tuesday, June 26, shows how Nia with the arts can provide stress management tools for everyday life.

"I wanted to find that bridge between professional Valerie and free spirited Valerie, and that's how Groove and Wellness was created," says Sanchez.

"It involves the movement, the interconnectedness of wellness and how traveling can contribute to your growth as a person. It is still taking shape, but the essence is transformation and giving people tools to cope with things they're going through personally and professionally."

Sanchez was first bitten by the travel bug a few years prior. Seeking a change of pace, she took a one-way flight to Honolulu, Hawaii, to work for a startup media and creative publishing company and discovered Nia not long after. Sanchez explains that Nia dates back to 1983, making it one of the first forms of fusion fitness as it draws from three areas: martial arts, dance arts, and heal-



Mindfulness is a big part of Nia classes in Tallahassee. NIA TECHNIQUE

ing arts. She first witnessed a class during a press preview on the island.

The demo lasted 15 minutes and afterward she was given free class passes. Although Sanchez had found Nia to be a little "wild and weird," she decided to try out a session. She hoped for 50 people to hide behind, but when she arrived she ended up being the only student in class. Halfway through she was hooked and once her free passes ran out Sanchez signed up for work exchange to clean the studio every morning in order to take class.

"It's taken me a couple years to wrap my head around what this practice has contributed to my life, but it's been a great tool for personal development," explains Sanchez, who has practiced Nia for seven years now.

She says dancing was part of her upbringing given her Nicaraguan roots and growing up in Miami. As a child, Sanchez dabbled in ballet, lyrical, and jazz dance and took up competitive cheerleading and dance team in middle and high school. She went on to attend Florida State University and worked in the world of advertising post-graduation.

Nia allows Sanchez to blend many of her early movement interests. She says many newcomers assume it's going to be like Zumba, but that the attention to "mindfulness" is what sets it apart. Some of her students describe it as "cardio yoga," or "free dancing with some

structure." The makeup of Nia comes across in nine "energetic personalities" that blend yoga, Alexander Technique, Feldenkrais Method, jazz, modern dance, Duncan Technique, Tai chi, Aikido, and Taekwondo.

"All abilities are welcome into a class because the teacher will demonstrate everything using three levels of intensity," describes Sanchez. "I have in my classes people who are in their early to mid-20s and people in their mid-60s and 70s, and we can still play in the same class at the same time because you make choices."

An eclectic playlist takes students through the seven cycles of the class. It begins with the interconnectedness of mind and body by intentionally removing distractions. Then there's the warming up of the joints to find pliability before building to the cardiovascular peak. Playing with gravity allows movers to find strength and flexibility, and it all ends with a cool down back to a neutral place in order to step out the same way they began, with mindfulness.

"I get people who are accountants or lawyers that say, 'don't tell anyone I come to the hippie class,'" laughs Sanchez. "It's a stretch for some people, but it's a totally decompressing experience. If they want to kick and yell and punch, that's available to them. If they want to back off and be on the mat and receive in a different way, I make space for that

## If you go

**What:** A Gateway to Change: Using Nia dance, movement, and the arts to calm the mind and manage stress

**When:** noon-1 p.m., Tuesday, June 26

**Where:** Capital Regional Medical Center, 2626 Care Drive

**Cost:** Free admission

**Contact:** For more information, call 850-692-9569 or visit <https://www.grooveandwellness.com/>.

too. It can satisfy many bodies at one time."

Sanchez believes in outsourcing inspiration for her lesson plans by taking other movement classes around the city. Aerial yoga is one of her favorites as it contrasts Nia's more grounded, rooted style. She also checks in with her mentors and trainers regularly as she continues her training. She feels that her time with instructors in Australia were especially valuable as they taught her how to relax into the act of teaching and embrace the people in the room to keep the class tailored to their needs.

In her upcoming workshop, Sanchez is excited to go deeper into the practice by shedding light on the medical benefits of Nia. She hopes those who attend the lunch and learn will walk away with confidence and the tools to manage their day-to-day stress, and might decide to give classes a try.

Sanchez's main mission is to give all her students full permission to be their authentic selves in the studio. Even though it can be challenging to let go, she wants to combat the insecurities she felt when taking fitness classes and replace them with body gratitude and appreciation.

"I want people to leave feeling successful about what they can do with their bodies," says Sanchez. "Bodies need to move. We physically have to move otherwise stagnation gets heavy and depresses our energy. I find that movement and the arts gives us an opportunity to process, internalize, and reflect, and ultimately helps us to dance with the idea of change."

*Amanda Sieradzki is the feature writer for the Council on Culture & Arts. COCA is the capital area's umbrella agency for arts and culture ([www.tallahasseearts.org](http://www.tallahasseearts.org)).*