

# From accident springs sisterhood of belly dancers

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Dancing has aided the principal instructor and founder of The Women's Bellydance Center, who goes by Julianna, in battling stress and fatigue, but it's also saved her from surgery. Whiplash left her barely able to hold her head up in the wake of a car accident a few years ago. Her doctors were confused as to why physical therapy wasn't working even after reviewing the MRI results.

Meanwhile, Julianna stayed dedicated to keeping up with her dance classes, performing upper body movements from her seat in a chair in tandem with physical therapy. When her teacher explained head slides, a movement in Middle Eastern dance where the head literally slides on the neck from side to side, an explosive and inexplicable sound from the back of the room left the class startled. It was Julianna's tendon popping back into place and relieving her of the pain she had felt since the accident.

"I grabbed my neck and went to my knees on the floor," recalls Julianna. "It was from the release because the nerve had been pinched for so long. I went back into the doctor two days later, and was out of physical therapy in two weeks."

Her dance career started off with a similar bang — growing up in Illinois, she was enrolled in tap classes at 6 years old. Julianna continued her dance training in ballet, modern, and jazz dancing with Marcia Hicks of the Chicago Ballet. She was 16 when she saw her first belly dancer at a Greek restaurant in Chicago and was captivated by the movement of the form. After moving to Tallahassee, Julianna began seriously training in Middle Eastern dance for 10 years.

She remains dedicated to learning from the top teachers in the world and has attended workshops with performers like Ansuya, Aegela, Mesmera, Jim Boz, Kamal, Tarik Sultan and Morocco. Julianna is also continuing her education in Cairo, Egypt, at ISOC, learning from Professor Hassan Khalil and has earned the first part of her degree, which encompasses the Basic Rhythms of Classical Oriental Music and the Egyptian folklores of Ghawazee, Zaffa, and Shabbi. Among other certifications, she is also versed in the fundamentals of Egyptian Raqs Sharqui, the modernized style of belly dance that incorporates Hollywood-style dancing.

"I've always walked away with something valuable from every dance teacher that I have taken a class with," says Julianna. "It could be a piece of information, a move, a better understanding of the culture, the dance form, where it came from, or where it's going. There's so much history that I think a person could study it their whole life and still not know everything."

Since being introduced to Middle Eastern dance, Julianna has immersed herself in every part of the form. She collaborates on designing the elaborate costuming, letting her imagination take her to far-off lands when it comes to fabricating the intricate satins, cottons, sequins, beads, rhinestones and feathers. In performances she is overwhelmed by the movement and music



Dendera Dancers — Studio Troupe — perform sword dance at Springtime Tallahassee.

TREY MCNABB

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**IF YOU GO**

**What:** Raqs Tally  
**When:** July 8-10 (times vary)  
**Where:** The Women's Bellydance Center, 15441 S. Monroe St. and The Moon, 1105 E Lafayette St.  
**Cost:** \$15 general seating. Free for children ages nine and under  
**Contact:** For more information, call 850-590-8387 or visit [www.thewebcenter.com](http://www.thewebcenter.com)

that belly dancing brings out in herself as a person, as she matured from a shy wallflower who used to only dance classical forms like ballet and modern.

She has performed locally at the Sahara restaurant where her background was often inquired about due to the authentic quality of her movements. In 2005, she made the decision to open her own studio at Railroad Square and begin teaching. During the day she works for the State Department, but looks forward to her evenings at the Women's Bellydance Center. Some of the women have been with the Center since its opening, making up a tight-knit community.

"Belly dance has such a deep connection to the type of person that I want to be that I can't imagine my life without it in some way, shape, form, or fashion," says Julianna. "When a person walks in here, I tell them to not hold back, jump in, and introduce yourself and it won't be long before you're part of our warm, wonderful dance family. If there was one word to describe all the girls here it's sisters."

She prioritizes a balanced education, and depending on the dance style Julianna is teaching, she is always sure to share the roots and historical connec-

tions of a movement or prop with her students. One such prop, the shamadan, dates back to the Ottoman Empire. Shaped like a candelabra and worn on the head, Julianna explains how they evolved, starting with Egyptian women balancing candles on their heads so that they could carry more food in dark restaurant settings to leading wedding parties and other special events.

Sharing videos of her favorite dancers is another teaching tool. She often shows one performance by Nadia Hamdi that showcases the strength and agility needed to balance the shamadan while performing physical feats with finesse. The movements are grounded and rely on making deep connections in the body. Above all, Julianna says the most important aspect of belly dance is learning how to relax even while focusing on individual steps. She reminds beginners to not be discouraged but to know that it takes discipline and patience to master the isolations and become comfortable moving your body in a new way.

"Where ballet is very lifted and very airy and light, Middle Eastern dance is more earthy, grounded and fluid," she explains. "If you have anything tight or rigid you're not going to be able to do the moves. I tell my students, you want enough strength in your legs to keep yourself from hitting the floor and enough strength in your heart to hold it up proud."

Transitioning from performer to teacher, Julianna also stepped into the role of choreographer. Her process heavily emphasizes music and the story it tells. Finding the right beat is key, and she often searches for a melody that matches the narrative she envisions onstage. A still-in-progress piece called "Breathe Your Dreams to Life," fuses modern and Middle Eastern dance together, and hopes to tell a dreamlike story of a dancer shifting from one art form in search of another.

Julianna also enjoys theatrical choreography and is inspired by the interweaving motion and colors that come together as a beautiful tapestry onstage. She hopes one such number will open the studio's 10th-anniversary

event, Raqs Tally. The three-day extravaganza begins Friday, July 8, with fire dancing workshops by Renegade Roxy, folkloric dance classes with Petite Famililla and a performance with guest artist Omaris, and concludes Sunday with Karma Karmelita. The show will take place at The Moon, a venue the studio has performed in many times, and where Julianna has one outstanding after-performance memory.

"One of my dancers gave an absolutely incredible, flawless performance," remembers Julianna. "Her father had been trying to tell her to stop dancing and that what she was doing was wrong. After the show, he told me he was so very proud of his daughter and happy that she didn't listen to him and that I taught her how to dance."

For Julianna, Middle Eastern dance has been like finding a piece of her "soul that was missing," and she finds no greater reward than passing that energy and light along to her students. The workshops and classes at the studio are open to all ages, and both men and women are welcome to participate.

From starting in Railroad Square and performing on First Fridays to returning to the Moon, Julianna is most excited about having a show of this magnitude for the first time in four years. As a performer, choreographer, and teacher nearing her sixth decade, she still enjoys taking the audience on a journey into her world and many choreographic narratives, and whether the audience knew the story or not, she was always happy to see them come along for the ride.

"Belly dance will always be the dance of the people," states Julianna. "It doesn't matter whether the dance is Egyptian, Lebanese, Turkish, or from anywhere else in the world, if a person allows themselves to be open minded they can be touched by the dance form."

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)).