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Zumba enthusiasts dance their way to fitness

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LOXLEY, Ala. — When Lisa Rodrigue was a youngster in Houma, La., she loved to dance. She took dance lessons for years.

Until one day, she was singled out for a special project.

"I was in dancing school, and I got pulled out by a lady to teach fitness," said Lisa, now Lisa Brown of Daphne. She found she enjoyed teaching fitness classes, and made a career of it. She's been an instructor for more than 20 years. She says she is certified by FITOUR®.

Needing to get another certification, she stumbled onto "Zumba," a fitness class that combines fast-paced Latin and occasionally other styles of music with fairly easy to follow dance moves to create what proponents claim is a high energy, calorie-burning workout.



Zumba class instructor Lisa Brown revs the class up before it starts. (Independent Staff photo by Donna Riley-Lein)

"I was watching the Today show," said Brown, "and I thought, 'this is hot.'"

The concept was created by Alberto "Beto" Perez in the late 1990s. Brown says Perez came up with the concept when he walked into a fitness class and realized he had forgotten his traditional "aerobics music." Working from tapes in his car, Perez crafted a session using the salsa, meringue and other music on which he'd been raised.

The class, Brown says, was a hit, and Perez began spreading his "Zumba" concept around the world.

"I saw that they were training in City Park (in New Orleans) and I realized that I was born to Zumba," said Brown. She added that the class combines her love of fitness with her early love of dance, making the style a natural for her. She quickly moved to become certified to teach Zumba, and now teaches the class exclusively. In addition to teaching exercise classes, Brown is a former massage therapist and competed in bodybuilding competitions.

But the class is not "work," or as happens so often, a "who looks best in her leotard" competition.

"Every class is a fiesta," said Brown. "It's high energy, and is good for all ages. You move at your

own pace. I have had 5-year-olds and 75-year-old students in the same class.”

Brown moved to the area as a result of her husband’s job, and lost no time bringing the exercise to the area. A full schedule of classes can be found on her Web site, fitlisa.com.

Brown teaches a class Wednesday evenings at 7 p.m. at the Loxley Civic Center. The class draws students from all over the area and is just \$5 per person per session. Unlike some fitness studios, there is no obligation to purchase more lessons. Brown says there is no contract.

There is no fancy equipment needed for Zumba either.

“The best part is that this class is almost like a nightclub without the pick up lines and the alcohol,” said Brown.

And let’s skip the dressing up part, too.

Most of the 40 or so women who came out for Brown’s class a few weeks ago wore t-shirts, sweatpants and athletic shoes. Hair was no-nonsense simple and clipped back. A bottle of cool water was a must-have accessory.

“This is the class for you if you like to dance,” said Brown. “Notice I did not ask if you could dance. It’s not what you look like — it’s what you think you look like.”

For Michelle Freitag of Robertsedale, the class was part of fulfilling a New year’s resolution to get more fit.

“This is my first class,” Freitag said, adding that she’d never taken a fitness class before.

For Ginny Ford of Daphne, the class was old hat — she’s been coming since November.

“I’m having a lot of fun,” she said.

Pam McMahon of Loxley has been attending class for about three months.

“You do lose weight and you feel so good afterward,” she said.

When asked if the class was hard on newcomers who might not know all the moves and steps, McMahon’s reply came quickly, “Not at all. We all have to request assistance now and then.”

The class is “not for everybody,” Brown warns.

“If you hate dancing and you don’t like Latin (music), this is not the class for you.”