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Our readers' favourite virtual fitness instructor is Jennifer Hicks

Readers' Choice 2020: Online classes blend dance, movement, martial arts, self-awareness, body positivity and fitness

By Glenn Sumi | Nov 19, 2020



There's a reason why Jennifer Hicks was voted by NOW readers as the best virtual fitness instructor. Before she started teaching NIA Dance – a unique blend of dance, movement, martial arts, self-awareness, body positivity and fitness – she was a student.

She loved it so much she wanted to spread the word and make other people feel just as great about themselves.

Hicks has a complex history with her body – and with exercise. More than a decade ago, she was battling adult-onset anorexia nervosa and was addicted to exercise.

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"I credit NIA for a lot of my healing around those two issues," says Hicks. "NIA taught me how to listen to and respect my body. It showed me how to use movement to feel good – not as a punishment, which is what I was doing before."

One of the things Hicks especially loves about NIA is its use of music.

"Music is the foundation of what we do," she says. "It inspires the movement. It's not just in the background. We listen carefully and choose music for mood and inspiration. In a way, it fuels our movement."

Pivoting to virtual classes after the pandemic hit took some getting used to.

"I started out with a Bluetooth headset and my old MacBook Pro, and once I realized we were in it for the long haul, I upgraded," she explains. "I hired an audio professional to tell me what equipment I needed. So I'm all set up with really good sound quality and an updated camera and everything. It's been a really nice way to stay connected to everyone."

These days her participants include not just people from Toronto but from New York City, Amsterdam and Mexico City.

"It's removed a lot of obstacles for people and made it more accessible," she says.

Speaking of accessible, Hicks trained as a speech language pathologist, often working with patients recovering from a stroke or brain trauma or living with Alzheimer's. Besides running her virtual fitness classes for people standing up, she offers ones for the seated.

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"Someone might be recovering from a hip replacement," she says. "I also have a couple of people living with Parkinson's disease. I offer classes to people with different needs. I don't overload them with information, I repeat things and don't speak too quickly – being sensitive to things like that."

As people are coping with motivation and body issues during the pandemic, Hicks has one message for them: it doesn't matter what it looks like, only how it feels.

"At NIA we choose movements that feel good in our bodies, that bring us joy and pleasure," she says. "We avoid anything that causes pain."

Check out the full list of this year's Readers' Choice winners [here](#).

@glennsumi

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Glenn Sumi

Glenn started writing for NOW's theatre section in 1997. Currently, he edits and contributes to the film and stage sections. He sees approximately 280 live stage shows and 150 movies a year. His mother once described his job as "Seeing The Lion King"



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