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Gina Capossela leads her belly-dancing class Wednesday at the Dancer's Corner in White River Junction.

**(Valley News — Channing Johnson)**

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The students warm up.

(Valley News — Channing Johnson)

## The 'Ultimate Anti-Aerobics'

By Dan Mackie

Valley News Staff Writer

"I didn't want to die in a brown corduroy skirt," says Gina Capossela, dressed like a dancer, in black mostly, as she explains why she changed her life.

She is petite and thin -- lucky genes, she says -- and speaks with considerable potential energy, as if stillness is just a brief lull before motion.

For some years she was a social worker at Headrest in Lebanon, then executive director of an after-school program. It was good work, she says, helping people patch up their lives. In those days, she says, she was quite different. She was an intense listener, and "I was very, very shy."

And then she decided to change the music of her life.

She decided to dance.

Not just any dance, but Middle Eastern dance, aka belly dancing, the swaying, shimmying dance that shocked prim Victorians but has lately been out-fleshed by pop fashion and culture.

Lots of Upper Valley women -- and a few men -- have joined her. Capossela is offering belly-dance classes from White River Junction to Randolph, and she said

most are full to overflowing. She also teaches at the Community College of Vermont, where her course includes reading and dancing both.

Exercise fads come and go, but Capossela said belly dancing is “the ultimate anti-aerobics.” She doesn't promote it for exercise, though people say it tones and helps them shed pounds.

“It's a dance to express, not impress,” Capossela said, that teaches “beautiful movements and beautiful ways to express yourself.”

This dance form doesn't require ballerina thinness, she said, or youth, for that matter; most of her students are in their 30s to their 50s. “It's about being more of who you are,” she said.

At a beginner's class at the Little Theater in Woodstock this week, a dozen women and one man warmed up as they might for any exercise class, then danced for nearly an hour in rows -- resembling a wedding line dance -- as Capossela gave directions like “hip, step, hip ... hip, step, hip.” The movements were fairly simple; advanced classes add items such as veils or even canes.

No bellies were in view in Woodstock, but most wore hip scarves, some with thin metal pieces the size of coins that shimmered and jingled as they moved. They were young and old, thin and unthin; some danced with natural grace and some with effort.

The Middle Eastern music to a Western ear had pulsing rhythms, voices singing unknown words that created a haunting sound, almost a melodic moan. The dance movements were compact, but often involved a vigorous flick of the hip.

This class had progressed in recent weeks from individual moves to short choreographed dances. “What I'm seeing today looks beautiful,” Capossela declared near the end.

The belly dancers included one with a belly and a half. Kim Watson of Woodstock is pregnant, with her baby due in April. “My doctor thinks it's great,” she said about the class. “It's totally different. You get a lot of exercise, but you don't think you are.”

Charlet Davenport of Woodstock, an artist and yoga teacher, said she approves of Capossela's precision. “She's absolutely correct” in the way she directs people to hold their bodies, she said. And Davenport said she loves “the weird and wonderful music.”

Tricia Sarnoff of Woodstock takes three classes a week. “This is amazing,” said the mother of four, who said the dance has made her conscious of how she moves throughout the day and has brought a spark to winter. “I just think the Upper Valley has been screaming for this kind of self-expression,” she said.

Also in the class was Sam Dorr, a Lebanon High School senior, an all-state musician who hopes to become a synagogue cantor some day. “It allows me to feel I have a sense of coordination,” he said about the dance. “As men, we're told we have to be rigid.”

In the Middle East, both women and men dance, but usually separately. Capossela, who studied dance at American University in Washington, where she received a master's degree, said attitudes and styles about belly dancing vary throughout the Mideast. In more conservative countries, professional dancers are socially looked down upon, not someone you'd want your son to marry. But if they are great talents they become like Hollywood celebrities.

The International Academy of Middle East Dance gives this introduction: "The dance form we call 'belly dancing' is derived from traditional women's dances of the Middle East and North Africa. Women have always belly danced, at parties, at family gatherings, and during rites of passage. A woman's social dancing eventually evolved into belly dancing as entertainment ('Dans Oryantal' in Turkish and 'Raqs Sharqi' in Arabic). Although the history of belly dancing is murky prior to the late 1800s, many experts believe its roots go back to the temple rites of India. Probably the greatest misconception about belly dance is that it is intended to entertain men. Because segregation of the sexes was common in the part of the world that produced belly dancing, men often were not allowed to be present."

American attitudes about the dance are colored by the way it was introduced here. Capossela said it came to the United States at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, where the dance amazed and scandalized audiences. It also, along with the Ferris Wheel, helped save the faltering fair, Capossela said.

Hollywood, carnivals and sleazy showmen seized upon the dance form, sometimes linking it with stripping and, according to Capossela, playing on Westerners' tendency to "exoticize" the East as mysterious and veiled. Some harem fantasies came into play as well.

While in Washington, Capossela danced with the Silk Road Dance Company, which performed at embassies, U.N. functions and the Kennedy Center. She came back to Vermont, where she grew up, because she thought this was fertile territory for something different. She's been teaching for several years, and takes the dance seriously -- no restaurant entertainment or tacky personal appearances. Her Web site, [www.ginadances.com](http://www.ginadances.com), speaks of a higher mission -- "inspiring personal transformation through the dances of the Middle East."

She's of Italian descent, not Middle Eastern, and said her family was taken aback by her new career at first. "I think it took them a while to get used to it, but now they're great supporters."

Capossela said the dance increases flexibility, and students have told her that they've danced away back pain or joint stiffness. It lifts mood, she said, and she encourages women to use the dance to think of themselves differently. If they stick with it, she said, they'll improve, and as they improve and connect with their inner dancer, "they'll feel beautiful."

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