

RHYTHM AND RELAXATION SINCE 1983

The California-founded fitness program Nia, which combines yoga, dance and martial arts, has become popular worldwide

By Serena Markstrom
Oregon Daily Emerald

Ceiling fans push the smell of sweat around a fourth-level studio in downtown Portland's Pythian building. Below the fans, members of a primarily female class place their "tails" on the floor.

About 50 students move around the hardwood floor on bare feet. The music is soft keyboard sounds with chimes easing in and out of the melody. Some follow Debbie Rosas' movements, and others move as they feel fit.

This is a Nia class taught by Rosas, one of its two founders. Nia is a mix of dance, martial arts and yoga. It aims to activate the mind, body and spirit for a holistic workout. The principles of Nia, short for Neuromuscular Integrative Action, have become fitness buzzwords, but the Portland-based Nia has been growing since 1983 and now has about 20,000 students worldwide.

Rosas tells this class, "There is a soft wall behind you; keep moving till you connect," and most of the class members slowly follow, stretching their backs toward an imaginary wall.

There is an overwhelming sense of calm and comfort in the room, enhanced by large indoor plants near tall windows. Class members often close their eyes and focus deeply on what they are doing and what their bodies tell them to do next. Some lie still on the floor, taking part in the moment by listening.

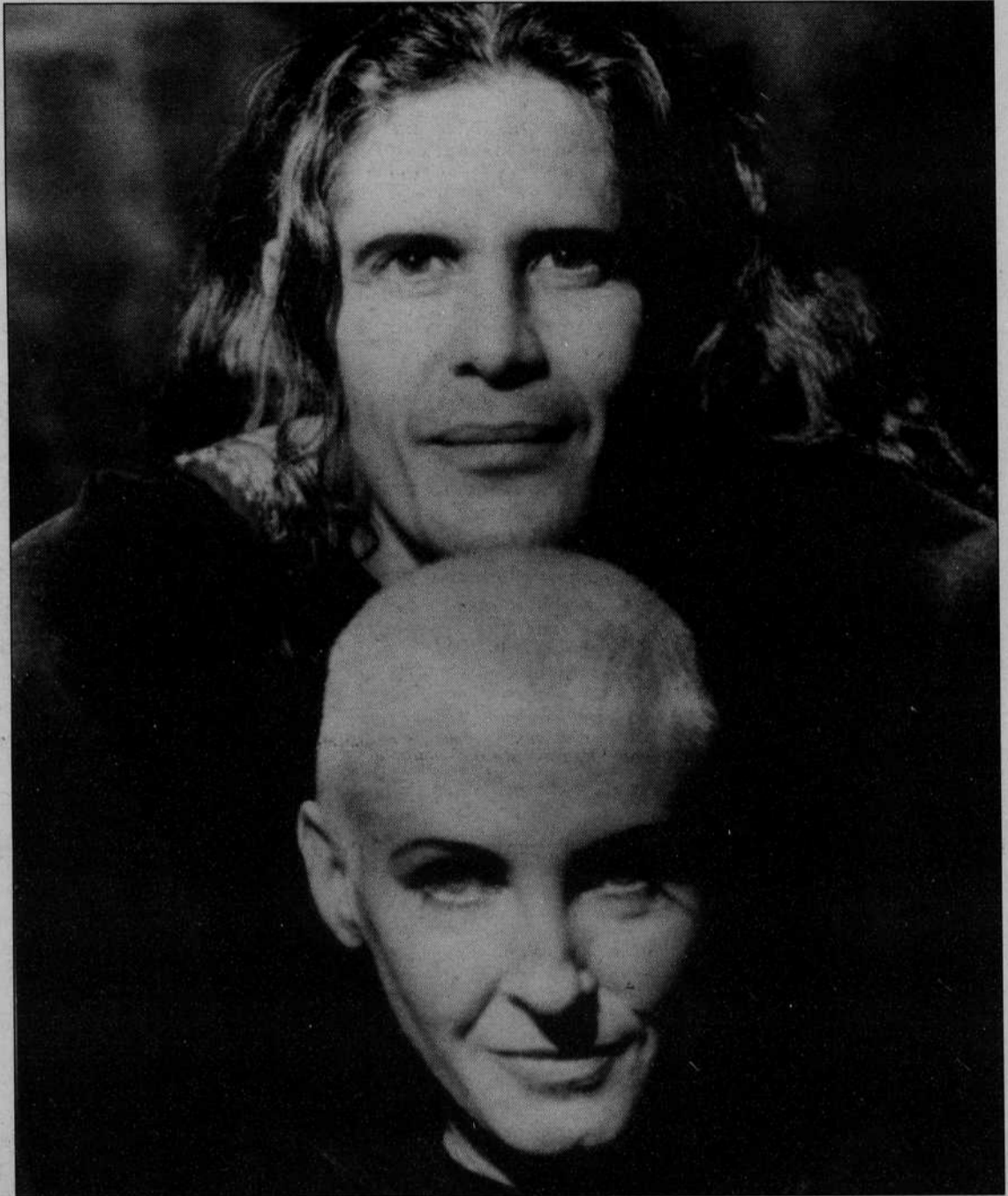
“When it comes to the body, there's always something to explore. That's what's so exciting.”

Debbie Rosas
Nia co-founder

One male participant lies on his back and rotates his legs as though riding an imaginary bicycle while the rest of the class leans into Rosas' next suggestion.

On any given Saturday morning, the mood in this room and music will be different. One of Nia's mantras is variety. In Swahili, the word Nia means "with purpose." Whether the movement is a high

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(Above) Debbie Rosas and Carlos Rosas, the founders of Nia. (Left) Debbie Rosas leads a Nia class.

Courtesy photos



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