

Line dancing for Jesus

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Belinda Haywood didn't want to give up what she loved.

She had made her name in Cleveland teaching line dances. Romantic ones like her "Enchanted Evening" routine. Urban young folks clamored for the "Booty Bounce" and the "Shake What Your Mama Gave You."

Her classes drew dozens of people to nightclubs. But even though she worked with a DJ to sanitize the lyrics to popular music, she found that as times changed, it became increasingly tough to stay classy.

Now she has a new approach.

"One, two, ready, push off," Haywood said on Wednesday night, bouncing through a new routine as she taught it to 20 comfortably dressed women in the basement of New Community Bible Fellowship, a Cleveland Heights church.

And she's never been happier. "I feel like I'm living my purpose now," said Haywood, 46, a hospital project analyst who has taught dance in the evenings for 17 years.

Her new take on dancing? Gospelcise.

"I want to do things that glorify God more. . . . I can use what I was born to do, to help others stay healthy so they can live in their purpose."

She began four years ago by making up gospel routines for women at her own church, New Community. Slowly, more church doors have opened for Haywood, who studied modern dance in her youth at Cleveland Music School Settlement and Rainey Institute.

Through North East Ohio Neighborhood Health Inc.'s Women of Wellness program, she brings her class to local churches on Mondays, Tuesdays and Thursdays. And next month she'll become even busier, adding Friday and Sunday classes at the Multiplex in Cleveland.

Haywood's routines still have the sense of being imported from the club, because each is a series of memorized steps tied tightly to a song with an infectious hook and singalong lyrics.

Yet the music has an uplifting flavor to it, and Haywood feels like she's in a new world, far away from the coarse language and sexual references that she once spent a lot of her energy trying to edit out.

"I am not forgotten. God knows my name, he knows my name," her class members sang along on Wednesday, as they added a catchy new song by Israel and New Breed to their dance repertoire.

Before class began at New Community, they prayed, holding hands in a circle. "Thank you for everything, Lord God. You know our struggles, you know what we have to deal with. Touch our jobs, Lord, touch our homes," said Brenda Vann, a "coach" provided by the church who makes sure participants get the spiritual help they need.

Mixing exercise and praise

Clearly, it's a sisterhood. Before they get started, the women share bad news of a bereaved member, and the good news that one attendee has lost 4 pounds and another has lost 3.

Haywood said she has had to tinker with the wording, since some churches think the term "line dancing" is too secular. To appease them, she changed the name to "gospelcise routines."

"I'll call it what you want me to call it," she laughed. "Exercise is exercise," she said, looking like a cheerleader as she bounded around the room, leading the steps to Martha Munizzi's "Glorious." Hands raised in praise, the class did an augmented electric slide, adding a hop and kicking high at the turn.

"Get to dancing, singing, jumping, leaping," the class sang along. "Get to shouting, make it louder, make it glorious. Start rejoicing, praising, lifting, raising. Get to shouting, make it louder, make his praise glorious."

When they heard "A Brighter Day" by George Huff, the women instantly separated into lines, eager to do their favorite routine. This dance used up the entire room as they shimmied backward, twisted, turned and then strode forward. It's a fun exercise because the choreography tests their memory, said Haywood, giving a quick lesson to a newcomer.

Once everyone has learned the movements, she adds more intricate steps to keep it interesting.

It's a fun but demanding workout, and participants work up a sweat while getting their praise on. Carolyn Murrock, a postdoctoral fellow at Case Western Reserve University's nursing school, last year arranged for Haywood to teach a church-based dance class and then documented that participants lost an average of 5 to 10 pounds while attending twice a week for eight weeks.

Ten weeks after the study ended, Murrock went back to survey the women, and found they had decided to hire Haywood on their own and were still losing weight. The women also improved their aerobic capacity, she said. Her results, Murrock said, dispel the myth that you have to work out more frequently to get results: "Something is better than nothing," she said.

The survey results gave Murrock a new respect for the idea of bringing exercise directly to sedentary black women, who suffer disproportionately from heart disease, diabetes and other ailments that can be improved by working out. For them, church is a more comfortable place than a health club. They know the people and feel welcome.

"A lot of the needs that we go outside for can be met right inside the church," agreed the Rev. Kevin James, pastor of New Community.

Murrock's study also showed that 77 percent of Haywood's participants stayed with the class until the study was over - an unheard-of retention rate when it comes to exercise, Murrock said. "But when you're dancing and laughing and having fun, an hour goes quickly."

To cool the women down at the end of Wednesday's class, Haywood put on a gentle song by Munizzi called "Because of Who You Are."

"OK, ladies, this is time to focus on our Heavenly Father. We won't think about anything else but him and the words of this song. I want you to stretch and relax," Haywood said.

Class members lowered their heads and clasped their hands in a graceful bow.

"We're bowing before the Lord. I'm casting my concerns at his feet," said Stephanie J.W. Ford, a New Community member who said the class is a great opportunity to lose one's cares, if just for an hour.

"I can guarantee that somebody in this room tonight may need a light bill paid or may have trouble paying the mortgage," she said. "We just need this time with the Lord."