

Dancing Like There Is No Tomorrow: A Story of Survival and Dreams

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Meeting Niosha Nafei and listening to her talk about Persian Belly Dancing and how it differs from the other styles of Belly Dancing, one is struck by her energy, beauty and vivacious spirit. However, few would even begin to guess the challenges this thirty two year old mother of two has faced and battled against in the past two years.

Niosha started learning to dance when she was 5 years old in Tehran, Iran where she was born and raised. During her childhood she learned western dances such as ballet, gymnastics and modern dance. At age 13, she started learning traditional, folk and modern Persian dances and also belly dancing. Niosha started teaching dancing privately in her home when she was 16 years old. At the time Niosha was growing up in Iran, dancing and teaching the art form could not be done publicly due to the restrictions placed by the government. She continued teaching Persian dancing when she immigrated to the United States in 1991 and founded the Niosha Dance Academy at the same time. While teaching Persian Dance, Niosha also started learning other styles of dances like Flamenco, Ball Room Dancing, Jazz and Hip-Hop.

At her Academy, Niosha teaches traditional, modern, folk and Persian Belly Dancing. The traditional Persian dances are set to stories that are mimed and expressed by the dancers. Persian folk dances are traditional regional dances

and vary in style and music from region to region while the modern dances are faster and borrow the style and tempo from western music and dance. Persian belly dancing taught by Niosha is a blend of Arabic belly dance and Persian folk dances. This form of dance has many arm, hand and head movements with an emphasis on stomach and belly rolls. Niosha and her students perform regularly in cultural festivals and local community events and have won several awards in dance competitions.

Soon after she immigrated to the United States, Niosha Nafei won the 1992 Miss Persia title in California and later also had her own show in FARS T.V. Five years ago Niosha settled in Fremont with her husband Jay Jamali in Warm Springs.

In early 2002 after the birth of her second son fate decided to test Niosha by throwing her a hard challenge. She was diagnosed with Non-Hodgkins Lymphoma when her son was three months old. These were dark days for the young family with 2 small children, 3 years old and 3 months old. Reflecting back on those days, Niosha feels that there were two important things that got her through the tough times; one was the fact that she accepted her illness right away feeling that a lot of people get cancer so why not her. Secondly, the overwhelming love, care and support that she received from her family, friends and community. Seeing the outpouring of good wishes and flowers received daily, she decided to fight the disease and not

give up. Niosha says, "I am not very religious but I believe in God and feel that everything happens for a reason. I could not see the reason at the time but felt that I will know it at the right time." She also decided to videotape herself going through the chemotherapy and radiation treatment and use it to educate people. The hardest part of the treatment was losing her beautiful long black hair. Growing up in a culture where looking good was important and having been a role model for young teenagers as a beauty queen and a talented dancer she worried how people would perceive her being bald and putting on a lot of weight. She tried to hide her baldness with a wig but found she got headaches in the heat of the summer months. Deciding that for her it was okay to be bald, she set an example by just being herself. Throughout her treatment she prayed for another chance to go on stage and dance. She also started planning another dance show while undergoing cancer treatment.

After finishing the treatment she found it very discouraging to not have the energy to dance. Before the episode she could dance continuously for five hours without getting tired. Now she is tired after just five minutes of dancing. She joined a Hip Hop class through the City of Fremont to lose some of the weight that she had gained and also to increase her stamina. Working hard for nearly five months she made a comeback with a show of Persian dances in April 2003 marking her first anniversary

after treatment. "That was the most successful show I have ever done. It was my dream coming true," says Niosha. "The Santa Clara Convention Center was sold out with 600 people attending the show, all my well wishers. I donated all the profits to the American Cancer Society and to kids who have cancer."

Since her battle with cancer, Niosha has learned not to take things for granted. She asks her students to do their very best and "dance like there is no tomorrow" as one never knows if they will have another chance when tomorrow comes. She is also very much aware of the profound effect people have on one another and wants to make someone a bit happier. Niosha, her family and her students participated in the Relay for Life in Fremont on June 3, 2003 and walked for 24 hours, raising more than \$5,000 for the American Cancer Society.

Niosha will also be introducing Fremont residents to Persian Belly Dancing in classes she will be teaching through the City of Fremont Recreation Department. The classes will start on January 13th and will take place every Tuesday from January 13th

through March 16th, 2004 from 8:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m. Fee for the classes will be \$95 and registration can be done either at <http://regerec.ci.fremont.ca.us> or in person at Recreation Registration, 3300 Capitol Avenue, Bldg B, Fremont. For more information call (510) 494-4320. Information about private classes can be obtained through the Niosha Dance Academy website www.niosha.com or by calling (510) 573-2804.

