

Not naughty but nice; More elegant than offensive, pole dancing fun exercise with sensuality on the side

Lois Legge Features Writer

IT'S A QUIET weekday evening in a tony Halifax neighbourhood.

Sprinklers lazily sweep over lawns and a sign across the street advertises The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints.

But there's something a little spicier going on in Trena Graham's basement.

Women are talking about sensuality and arched backs; about lifted bums and roaming hands, when they're not coiling their own hands and legs around floor-to-ceiling poles - heads bent back, hair swaying to a frisky new fitness trend.

Long the specialty of strippers, pole dancing, it seems, has sashayed into suburbia, as everyone from stay-at-home moms to career women take the plunge.

Graham's pole dancing groups - offered at her in-house business Trena's Studio of Dance - attract teenagers, women in their 40s, even senior citizens, although tonight the word "group" might be pushing it.

Half the class has stayed home after learning a reporter and photographer are sitting in.

And a few of the women who do show up are a bit shy about publicly revealing their exercise excursions.

But shy types, it turns out, are as likely to shimmy up and down stainless steel as extroverts or even exhibitionists.

It brings them out of their shell, Graham says, and puts them in touch with their sensual side.

Sensual - but not necessarily sleazy.

In fact, things seem pretty tame tonight, if you don't think too much about the seamier side of a dance style linked more with The Sopranos' Bada Bing than your neighbour's basement.

"Some people get the wrong impression of it . . . like I'm looking for a second career," Leslie, a class participant says with a laugh. "That's not it at all."

What it is, says the Lower Sackville woman, who doesn't want her last name used, is fun and excitement and great exercise, with a sprinkle of sensuality on the side.

Now in her eighth session, Leslie easily lifts herself off the floor, wrapping her legs around the slim pole and twirling round and round - forwards and backwards - in moves more elegant than offensive.

"It's really exciting," she says of the activity, which follows a series of warm-up floor exercises all slow-motion movements and mellow music,

with dimmed ceiling lights casting a twilight glow.

"The fast pace of it, you can lift your feet and throw your hair back and let go."

Graham, even more adept with gravity-defying, upside-down manoeuvres and all manner of acrobatics, says she feels like she's flying when spinning around and down the pole.

A trained ballroom and Latin dancer/instructor, she became hooked on pole dancing several years ago after being introduced to it by, of all things, an Oprah Winfrey show about "releasing your inner sexpot."

She signed up for training at the Los Angeles studio of featured guest, and pole dance expert, Sheila Kelley and soon started offering classes in Halifax - now also in the throes of what she calls a "huge" exercise trend.

So huge, competitor Christy Wade, owner of the Halifax dance/pilates business Studio In Essence, holds 10 classes per week.

The classes bring out "women who want to have fun," says Wade.

"Most of the girls are laughing the whole time and most people say it's (a) much better (workout) than the gym."

Pole dancing, echoes Graham, is a "phenomenal workout," a muscle-

working, confidence-building exercise that's particularly good for the upper body and abdomen.

And to hear the women at her studio tell it, it's also good for the soul.

Far from the image of pole dancing as a male-pleasing enterprise, these sisters say they're doing it for themselves.

"Every age, every size, outgoing girls, shy girls - everyone comes," says a 19-year-old participant, who doesn't want her name used.

The self-described "shy" girl joined up after moving about three months ago to Dartmouth from England, where pole dancing's also hot.

She loves the exercise classes Graham describes as more classy than naughty. And she loves the way pole dancing makes her feel.

"To them, everyone is beautiful and everyone is sexy and everyone can do these sensual moves," the teenager says of Graham and instructor Jennifer Zwicker, who often hears newcomers say it's the best workout they've ever had.

"And you just have to not be scared to look at yourself in the mirror and just do it. Don't be scared about how you look, just do it because everyone's got beautiful hips and you should just show them off."

Studio In Essence's main instructor Suzanne Bechard hopes more women will be showing off of their hips soon.

She'd like to start a pole dance competition in Halifax someday and hopes to run mini competitions within her classes soon. Winners would get a pole to take home, although not

necessarily for the reasons some might suspect.

"There's definitely a stereotype associated with it and . . . what brings people in the door is pole dancing, the whole kitschy thing about it, but what keeps them there . . . is it's just so much fun and it's fantastic exercise," says Bechard, while allowing there might be other temptations, too.

She recently sold 20 take-home poles and plans to bring in 20 more.

"When . . . I was calling and letting the people who ordered them know they were in, if I happened to speak to a spouse, they were very excited," she says with a big laugh. "They were like, "Woo-hoo - the poles are in!" "

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Figure:

Jennifer Zwicker demonstrates a move on the pole during a pole dance fitness class at Trena's Studio of Dance in Halifax. (Ingrid Bulmer / Staff)

Leslie throws back her hair and lets go during a recent pole dancing fitness class at Trena's Studio of Dance n Halifax. (Ingrid Bulmer / Staff)

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