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Maria Nhambu Bergh: Aerobics With 'Sassy Soul'

Maria Nhambu Bergh has a mission.

"My mission is to bring Africa into the lives of Americans so they can experience, participate and enjoy it," says the native East African fitness instructor.

Bergh spreads her message through the classes she teaches worldwide, her three video workout tapes, and the presentations she makes at events such as Black Expo.

"The challenges never stop," says the mother of two. My challenge is to educate the public about African dance form as a legitimate art."

Bergh's blend of traditional African dance with aerobic exercise has made her stand out within the competitive fitness industry.

Participants in Bergh's workouts sway their hips to native African music. They toss around khanga scarves, part of traditional African dress. They learn to speak a few Swahili words, and mimic the movements of the animals that roam the vast



Serengeti plains.

"***Aerobiccs With Soul®*** is multi-dimensional," says Bergh, who resides in Minneapolis, MN. "Fitness should be a part of who you are and a part of everyday life."

To create her cultural workouts, Bergh draws on the rich heritage of Tanzania, her homeland. She has just completed filming

her third video there, using the country's world famous national park system as a backdrop.

While Bergh says that 80-percent of video sales and most of her class participants are white, she wants blacks to learn about their African culture.

"Africans have been put on the back burner,"

she says. "But our culture is something of beauty and I want it to be taken seriously."

Minnesota might seem an unlikely spot for a transplanted African but Bergh likes everything about the northern city except the brutal winters.

"There are very few people of color in Minneapolis," she notes. "But many people here are very liberal and open."

The cultural workouts that Bergh created and then taught from her Minneapolis home have spread across the United States.

"This past year has been good for me," Bergh says. "The video sales are good and there has been an article about me almost every month."

Sales for Bergh's first video have reached over 75,000 copies. Her recent release, *Aerobiccs With Soul®—Serengeti* has sold 100,000 copies. But Bergh knows it is an uphill climb against fitness industry giants, such as Beverly Hills aerobic instructor Kathy Smith, who has sold over two million

video tapes.

It's hard for everybody in this business," Bergh says. "It's doubly hard to be African-American and a woman."

But Bergh has already proven her ability to overcome tremendous obstacles.

An orphaned child, she grew up in a German mission in Lushoto, in the Usambara Mountains near the Kenya border.

From 1959 to 1962, she attended Marian College in Morogoro, a boarding high schools for African girls operated by American Maryknoll nuns.

Following graduation, Bergh taught domestic science at Marian College. In 1963, a native Minneostan, who was teaching at Morogoro, helped Bergh attend the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul, MN, on a full academic scholarship.

Shortly after earning her degree in French in 1967, Bergh met and married Norwegian-born Kjell Bergh.

For eight years, she taught French and Kiswahili (the native language of Tanzania) at Minneapolis-area high schools and colleges.

But over the years, Bergh did not lose touch with her roots. "I wanted to educated and bring my culture here," she explains.

Bergh was able to do

just that through Young Audiences, a national program designed to expose inner-city children to classical music.

For 13 years, the classical music Bergh performed to countless classrooms across the Midwest was the rhythmic beat of African song and dance.

It was only after the birth of her second child that Bergh realized the power African dance could have for getting adults into shape.

Bergh's post-child-birth body included 60 extra pounds. She hated the aerobics classes she attended to shed the weight.

"I kept thinking there had to be something better," she recalls. "I wanted a program that was challenging."

Bergh found that challenge when she recalled the movements of native African dance.

"I thought about the fact that there were few overweight people in Africa," she remembers. "It was then that I combined traditional African dance and aerobics, although it was just for myself."

It didn't take long for Bergh to expand her exercise workouts. Over the years, people had often asked Bergh to create an exercise program for adults. Soon, she was teaching her Afro-aerobics workouts to others.

"I had nobody to follow," she says. But that didn't stop others from following her. She soon gained a small, but loyal following in the Twin Cities area.

Bergh came to national attention in 1988 with her first video – *Aerobics With Soul@-Karibu* (which means *welcome* in Swahili). The video rocked the fitness industry when it tied for first place, along with Jazzercise founder Judi Sheppard Misset, in the "aerobics-combination" category of a national competition sponsored by City Sports Magazine in New York.

Bergh works from her home. She begins her day by listening to African music tapes, usually purchased during her travels. For the next 1-2 hours, Bergh concentrates on choreographing new routines.

From 9:30 - 10:30 she teaches a class in her home. Following that, she takes a break, often going for a walk.

In the afternoons, she returns business calls and catches up on correspondence.

Evenings, classes are held in local YMCAs and churches. Bergh attends these workouts, although she doesn't always teach them.

"I go to get to know the instructors and the clients," she says. Currently,

she has three trained instructors leading the classes.

In addition to her Minneapolis-based business, Bergh acts as an East African tour guide several times a year.

While in Africa, Bergh has taught native dances to the young people there. She believes that many of the traditions are becoming lost in an Africa moving into the 21st century.

"I bridge the gap between traditional and modern by showing them what is beautiful and unique about their culture," she says.

Every winter, Bergh spends two months conducting classes and workshops on islands throughout the Caribbean.

Bergh has devised a system to handle all her endeavors. "I do things my way," she says. "But I always get things done on time."

Bergh's future goals include franchising *Aerobics With Soul@*, creating an infomercial to sell her products, and hosting an ethnic fitness television program.

Bergh believes that perseverance has helped her to achieve her dreams so far.

Live that dream, no matter what it looks like," she advises anyone who is working toward a goal. "Know it within your soul and stick to it."