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Cultural Workout

Forget high-impact aerobics done to mindless disco music. This Edina woman works you out to an African beat.

by

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On the bare floor of a mirrored studio in Edina, a handful of women dance till their legs burn and their pulse rates double. It's a scene duplicated daily in workout sessions throughout the Twin Cities. In Aerobics with Soul, however, the music vibrates with an African beat. Instead of hand weights, exercisers twirl half-pound scarves called *khangas*. Leading the class is Maria Nhamu Bergh, 50, a tireless fitness guru with a belief in the wider implications of her work.

"Aerobics with Soul is a total conditioning of the human being—mind, body and soul," Bergh says of the exercise program she created using African dance movements that work all the major muscle groups in each session. Over the past 10 years Bergh has led classes in her home studio and at the Marsh in Minnetonka, the Uptown YWCA in Minneapolis and the Sweatshop in St. Paul. She's also aerobized abroad—bringing Aerobics with Soul to Norway and several

Caribbean countries.

Fitness is just one goal driving Bergh. "My mission is to educate," she says, explaining that her exercise program is "a painless way to introduce Minnesotans to African culture." It's also a way for Bergh to reconcile her African homeland with Minnesota, where she has lived most of her adult life.



Maria Bergh: fitness with soul.

Bergh grew up at a German orphanage in Lushoto, Tanzania. She was selected to attend Marian College, a school run by American Maryknoll nuns in Morogoro. There, she became friends with Katherine Mamer of Onamia, Minn., who was teaching at Marian after graduating from the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul. Only five years older than Bergh, Mamer adopted the girl and brought her to Minnesota on a scholarship. Bergh excelled academically, graduating with honors in French and linguistics.

Bergh's career began as a French teacher at Regina and Washburn high

schools in Minneapolis. Later, she taught African heritage at Macalester College. She no longer teaches, but Bergh stays informed about African affairs, since "I find people expect me to know everything about Africa."

Twenty-five years ago Maria married Kjell Bergh, whom she met at a singles club. A journalist from Norway, Kjell switched gears and embarked on a business career, starting as a salesman for Borton Volvo. Today, the Berghs own Borton Volvo, along with a number of travel-related businesses combined as Bergh International Holdings. They have two children: Katarina, 23, who lives in Norway, and Karl, 16, a junior at Edina High School.

Bergh spent 13 years performing African dance and lecturing on African culture under the auspices of Young Audiences, a national organization associated with the Minnesota Orchestra. She volunteered for many years with Operation Bootstrap Africa, raising money to build schools in four African countries.

Along the way, Bergh met her biological mother and her brother. A few years ago she and her brother went to Africa in search of their father. By the end of that trip, Bergh had gone from being an orphan to having 11 siblings. Details of the rediscovery of her family will play a big part in the autobiography Bergh is writing.

Bergh is planning her third exercise video, which she wants to tape in Africa. Her first Aerobics with Soul video won first place in a contest sponsored by *City Sports* magazine in New York. Bergh's program "is not into spot reduction through 16 repetitions of this or 24 of that," she says. She pushes participants to pursue general fitness rather than preoccupy themselves with pulse rates or visions of a "perfect" figure.

In her Edina home, surrounded by the trappings of success, Bergh is animated, confident, enthusiastic. It's easy to see the determination that has brought her this far. A vulnerable, sensitive side hints at her difficult past, but in her drive and energy, it's clear that Bergh believes in making her own luck and, in keeping with a popular African saying, "fetching her tomorrow." ■