

Aqua aerobics instructor gathers devoted congregation with Motown and gospel music, party mood and empathy for the water timid

Description

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There are almost 80 bodies joyfully bobbing and weaving, swaying and swinging â??Âºmaking waves in the shallow lanes at the Martin Luther King Jr. pool on Carroll Street in the Bayview. Soul music pulses out from a large speaker on the pool deck.

Like a queen in her water court, right at the heart of the action, aqua fitness instructor Shari Chadwick calls out her signature throaty whoop, â??Hey! Hey! Hey! Hey!â?• Eighty voices follow lustily, deafeningly: â??Hey! Hey! Hey! Hey!â?•

> From 40 to 80 people regularly attend Shari Chadwickâ??s aqua aerobics class at the Bayviewâ??s Martin Luther King Jr. pool. (Video and all photos by Colin Campbell)

Chadwick flashes a radiant smile, â??Got to hear you breathing!â?•

Bob, a regular, shouts out, â??Men in the house!â?• The class is exceptionally diverse â?? men and women, teenagers to seniors, people with disabilities â?? defying the clichÃ© of aqua exercise being for older White ladies.

Raising her arms, glistening with water drops, over her head in what is almost a benediction, Chadwick intones, â??Thank you, God, for getting all these beautiful bodies safely here today!â?•

The music picks up as she laughs and calls, â??Party over here!â?•

â??Party right there,â?• the aqua congregation jumps and waves in response.

Fear of the pool

Hard to believe this is the same woman who was utterly terrified when she stepped into a pool for the first time 25 years ago at the Stonestown YMCA. Sheâ??d never learned to swim, and even the shallow end terrified her. She barely lasted 20 minutes. â??I was so petrified with fear, I clutched the pool deck

with both palms and stayed there, just swinging my legs.â?•



â??Thank you, God, for getting all these beautiful bodies safely here today!â?• Chadwick exclaims at the start of her class.

Pure desperation led this mother of three into the water, in hopes of escaping pain from sciatica that had become unbearable. â??I was at the point where I could hardly crawl to the bathroom or get in and out of my car.â?• Her doctor suggested water exercise.

She didnâ??t like taking strong medications, yet she initially dismissed her doctorâ??s advice as impossible for her, a non-swimmer. Yet, the pain worsened; it had become 24/7.

So, one day she went to the Stonestown YMCA to check it out. She liked the vibe, she said, and bought her first swimming suit.

â??First, I just held on at the edge and moved my legs back and forth. I got a little deeper and let my leg hang â?? and then I noticed a release in my back. No painâ?•, she recalled. â??I dried off, went home, the pain returned. But later that day I went back again. I began going three times daily, just moving myself in the water, and I got better. The water saved me.â?•

A mentorâ??s solution

How Chadwick went from deck â??clutcherâ?• to graceful water dancer and beloved aqua aerobics instructor is the story of the gradual building of her own confidence and a mentor she calls â??a gift in

my life.â?• Jody taught aqua aerobics at the Stonestown Y.

â??She noticed me always over by myself, and she said I should take her class. Told her I canâ??t swim and furthermore â??How many Black women do you see in the water? Itâ??s about our hair!â??

Jody said â??no problemâ??, gave her a water belt, and told her to hold on to the deck with just two fingers. â??Then I could exercise in the deep and never get my hair wet,â?• Chadwick said. â??I tell you that was a game changer!

While Jodyâ??s class was accompanied by Steely Dan, the Doobie Brothers and rainforest sounds, Chadwickâ??s features Motown, soul and funk, gospel, and big bands like Count Basie.

From 40 to 80 regulars pack her classes. Linda, wearing a neat shower cap to keep her hair dry, is among Chadwickâ??s congregation, â??I might be the oldest one here. Donâ??t ask. A friend got me off the couch to come, now I never miss it.â?•

Anthony, 73, retired from the Mayorâ??s Office of Children, Youth and Families is a big fan. â??Lots of out-of-shape people come to her class, people who wouldnâ??t move otherwise. She gets them moving.â?•

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Chadwickâ??s aerobics classes are always packed.

One of the moves she leads in the water, you could say is also symbolic, of what the water taught her. Leaning forward, she stretches her arm backhanded in front of her body, then swoops it around and through the water, creating a ripple, a current, a path. â??Clear your pathâ?• she shouts, â??nothing is stopping you!â?•

A San Francisco native, Chadwick was born in 1962 to a schoolteacher mom and an AC Transit bus driver dad. Her parents met in San Francisco in a bar on Third Street called Sam Jordanâ??s. Both had moved seeking a better life: her mother from Lake Charles, Louisiana; her dad, whoâ??d hitchhiked out

from Carthage, Texas.

They married and as newlyweds moved into a $35-a-month apartment at Page and Lyon streets. She and her sister, Sheila, were sent to private Catholic schools: St. Agnes in the Haight, then St, Michaelsâ??s, and finally, Presentation High School where Sister Annunziata warned her, â??Donâ??t you ever crack your knuckles, or theyâ??ll be bigger than a manâ??s.â?•

Romance on 101

She wanted the public school experience, so she got herself kicked out of Presentation and ended up graduating in 1980 from Lincoln High, where she was a cheerleader.

Chadwick took a summer job as a teenager that turned into a seven-year job in customer service, doing credit card authorizations in an office under the UNION 76 sign at the entrance to the Bay Bridge.

She attended City College of San Francisco for several years and then eloped to Reno to marry Gregory Charles Morgan. She was 24.

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She first encountered him at the age of 18 while driving on 101 near Silver Avenue. â??I just saw this muscled arm hanging out the driverâ??s window of a red Chevy. Heâ??d slow down, Iâ??d slow down. Heâ??d speed up. Iâ??d speed up.â?• Finally, they both pulled over, and, â??he said, â??I got the feeling you are trying to tell me something.â??â?•

â??He had on red short shorts, white tube socks, a mesh green shirt,â?• she remembers, then laughs, â??It was the â??80s, OK?â?•

He also had a good union job with Georgia Pacific. In 1983, they moved into a three-bedroom house for $500 a month on Palou Ave. â??All we had was a 1976 White Ford Monarch and a bed to start, but he had a good job and when I had my kids, I was able to stay home for 12 years.â?•

Her life was filled with family, work, church, and community.

Her daughter, Shunae, was born in 1985, and her son, Marques, in 1987. Another daughter, Monae, was born in 1994. Her granddaughter, Ryan Sierre, was born in 2009. Eventually, she went back to work for a mortgage company.

Everything was good but the sciatica. When the back pain started, it put a halt to her favorite activities: dancing and traveling.

â??I didnâ??t feel qualifiedâ??

But, in the water, she felt grand. So, it became a part of her life. Yet, she was dubious when, in 1999, Jody asked her to lead the class and told her she should be an aqua instructor. â??I didnâ??t see myself as qualified.â?•



Once deathly afraid of the water and unable to swim, Chadwick finally jumped in when pain from sciatica became overwhelming. Three years later, she had her aqua aerobics instructor certificate.

She hadnâ??t ever taught anything, But Jody encouraged her; the Y would pay for training. It wasnâ??t a simple certification. She had to learn all the bodyâ??s bones, all the muscles.

Three years after she first stepped into the pool, she became the first African American certified instructor at the Stonestown YMCA.

Over the last 18 years, she has taught her signature moves in pools across San Francisco: at the Bayview, Chinatown and Stonestown YMCAs, and various Parks and Rec pools.

She found her true north, her water home, at the Bayviewâ??s MLK Pool where she has taught for the last eight years. Her early evening classes come after a full dayâ??s work as the membership coordinator for Common Sense, a nonprofit that monitors and advocates for Internet policies that safeguard children, and offers age-appropriate ratings for a variety of media as well as digital citizenship curriculum to K-12 schools.

When her marriage ended in 2013, her responsibilities to her parents began. She helped care for them in their home until the end of their lives. Her dad died in 2000; her mom just last year.

She volunteers her time as an aqua instructor because, â??As my grandmother always said: â??Every good thing you do to help people unconditionally, that earns you a white feather for your angel

wings.â?? â?•

Paying it forward

The atmosphere outside the pool facility is charged with gleeful anticipation on a June summer evening, still bright at 6 as the solstice sun warms all the waiting bodies in their towels and robes, flip flops, and swim shirts.

Thereâ??s lots of joking and jostling as the line spills down the steps to the front door, as they wait for the lifeguards to unlock it. Chadwick points out the tallest gentleman.

â??I want to tell you about Nelly, who came to me three years ago.

He told me â??Iâ??ll be honest with you, I am scared of the water but I need some help.â?? I just said,â?? Will you trust me?â?? and I grabbed his hand, and we took a walk in the water so he could get a feel for it.

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â??He is holding my hand real tight, almost cutting off my circulation. As he gets to chest level, I tell him â??This is your space here, just jump with me lightly now, just hop. Then I told him, you have to go against the water, â??cause itâ??s moving and itâ??s going to move you. So, march forward.

â??Now this man is the first guy to show up every week. I said to him, â??I donâ??t give out door prizes for best attendance.â?? â?•

Chadwick knows that some of her most faithful students are low-income. She sees their swimming suits are worn out, and they could use water shoes. Some need transportation help. She wants to start a small nonprofit to raise money to provide these things. â??Itâ??s such a little that would make such a big difference.â?•

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naomi-marcus