

# Beating the drum for health

## No lessons needed: Join the circle, pound away and reduce stress



By Shari Rudavsky

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The beat is infectious. Whether you're standing or sitting when you hear it, you feel your feet tapping in time as the rhythm suffuses your body.

This is the sound of more than 35 people engaged in a drum circle, each one thump-thump-thumping on a drum, ssshake-ssshake-ssshaking the maracas, or ting-ting-tinging a tambourine. It's a sound that's heard every Thursday evening at Bongo Boy Music School in Castleton.

And it's a sound that may aid your health by boosting your immunity and reducing stress.

On a recent Thursday evening, as people gathered in the parking lot outside the school for Bongo Boy's free community drum circle, one theme emerged: stress reduction.

"It's very therapeutic," says Leslie McGuire, 46, who came from Irvington with her own drum. "It's a great way to get out all your frustrations. This is my place to do my own thing."

Drum circle etiquette demands no formal training. Participants at Bongo Boy's drum circle range in age from 2 to 80. Some weeks, only 10 people show up, forming an intimate circle. Other weeks, there may be more than 80 in three or more concentric circles.

On some occasions, people have picked up Hula Hoops and started to shimmy. Other times, an impromptu conga line has formed to the beat.

"It's about being one big pulse with the group," says Ed Gaus, president and founder of Bongo Boy Music School, which started the drum circle about 21/2 years ago. "It's really cool to see what it does for people . . . People come in, they're tired, and by the end, they're energized."

Little research exists to tie casual community drum circles to health benefits. But doctors have developed a specific protocol for drum circles -- often used in hospitals or other healthcare facilities -- that has met such a test.

One of the leaders in the research field, Dr. Barry Bittman, first encountered a drum circle at a professional conference where he was delivering a lecture on laughter's effect on the immune cycle. Bittman was amazed at what he saw and wondered whether it might serve as a form of stress reduction for his patients at the Mind-Body Wellness Center in Pennsylvania.

His initial impression was that it worked.

"It was like the Lay's potato chip effect -- you just can't get enough," he says. Some patients started the session in oxygen masks; by the end, the masks were dangling and the patients were breathing better.

Then he did a study comparing the immune response in a group that drummed regularly and one that sat in a circle and talked for the same period of time. To his surprise, there was no distinction. Eventually, he realized that many participants felt uncomfortable and self-conscious and feared they were not drumming correctly.

"We were actually increasing stress rather than improving it," he says. "We needed something to level the playing field."

So he developed a protocol, Health-Rhythms, to erase that concern. Subsequent research has shown that following it can strengthen the immune system, improve mood, reduce burnout and even reverse stress on the genetic level.

Remo Inc., a leading drum manufacturer, has started a Health Rhythms division devoted to teaching people how to turn drums into tools for well-being.

It begins with an ice-breaker activity designed to relax participants and break down barriers, says Alyssa Janney, manager of Remo's Health Rhythms division. Other exercises, such as asking people to drum out their name, follow.

Since 2001, Health Rhythms has taught about 1,200 people the protocol so they can run drum circles in hospitals, wellness centers, schools, churches and other facilities in their communities.

Laura Spelde, community liaison at the Indianapolis Symphony Orchestra, and her organization have added drums to their arsenal. A gift allowed the orchestra to invest in a set of drums and other percussion instruments, which they have taken around to a variety of audiences.

Drums in tow, Spelde has run workshops for Lilly corporate leaders, teachers and seniors. The orchestra also held drum circles on Monument Circle before last year's free summer concerts in Hilbert Circle Theatre.

And more drum circles could be in Indianapolis' future. Music Crossroads, a recently created organization, aims to use music and other arts to advance the quality of life in this city with activities such as recreational music-making.

Drum circles could definitely be among the initiatives, says Matt Carter, vice president of Music Crossroads and strategic development for the Indianapolis Convention and Visitors Association.

"Drum circles have been around for quite a while, and that is a form of music-making that is predominantly recreational," Carter says. "It's not a performance. It's not about being particularly good at that activity. It's about the benefits of coming together and doing something together and experiencing and exploring that playfulness in an essentially noncompetitive environment."

Many area schools are already using drum circles or variants on that theme. This spring, Bongo Boy worked with all the fifth-graders in Perry Township on a concert piece using only drums.

Lisa Goss, a music teacher who helped bring the professional drummers to the schools, has become a fan. The Greenwood resident has been attending the drum circle weekly. One recent week, she recruited 11 friends to join her.

Now, every elementary school in the district has a set of drums, and she's trying to acquire more so teachers can sign them out for use in their lesson plans.

Her 9-year-old daughter, Adrianna, isn't interested in the pedagogical benefits of drumming.

She likes one thing about them: "You can do your own thing."

Across the circle from her, Jeff Ehrlich, 46, was also doing his own thing. Some weeks, Ehrlich, who works at Fairbanks addiction treatment center, invites patients along to the circle.

Not only does it help Ehrlich deal with depression, he also finds it helps him cope with the aftermath of two severe head traumas that he's suffered.

"It's a good stress release," Ehrlich says. "A drum circle is a good way to build social skills, to interact with other people. It's a good place to express yourself."

Or, as Brian Fields, one of the facilitators for the circle, says: "It's like a Thursday night weekly therapy session."

Call Star reporter Shari Rudavsky at (317) 444-6354.

Joyful noise: Drummers of all skill levels come from around Indianapolis to Thursday evening drum circles in the parking lot at Bongo Boy Music School. Participants play drums, maracas and other rhythm instruments, either their own or the school's. - Michelle Pemberton / The Star

## Catch the beat

**What:** Bongo Boy Music School hosts a free community Drum Circle every Thursday. Pre-Jam at 7:15 p.m., Drum Circle from 7:30 to 8:30 p.m.

No experience necessary -- all ages and levels welcome. Drums will be provided.

Parents, bring your kids. Kids, bring your parents and friends. **A \$5.00 Hand Drum Class precedes the Drum Circle from 6:30pm-7:00pm**

**Where:** Bongo Boy Music School, 8481 Bash St., Suite 1100.

**Information:** (317) 595-9065.

