
St. Petersburg Times

To the beat of a different drum Series: WEEKEND DIVERSIONS

PAMELA GRINER LEAVY.

St. Petersburg, Fla.: Aug 27, 2004. pg. 8

Copyright Times Publishing Co.

If you have a heartbeat, you can drum.

That's the first lesson and the foundation of the African drum class, offered on Saturdays at the North Greenwood Recreation and Aquatic Complex in Clearwater.

Everyone has rhythm whether they know it or not, said James Champion, drum class instructor. Champion, a retired correctional officer from Chicago, finetuned his expertise playing with master drummers and participating in drumming circles from downtown Chicago to the Caribbean.

Champion's love of drumming goes back to infancy.

"I can remember when I was a baby in the crib beating my head on the wall," he recalled. "I must have been using my head for a drumstick. I liked the sound that it made. In school I used to beat on the wooden chairs. They had good sound."

Now Champion sits in sunset drumming circles on beaches from Treasure Island to Siesta Key to Nokomis.

"I teach from the heart and the spirit," Champion told his students. "You can go to different teachers and schools and learn a different method. There's a proper way and that's what I'm going to teach you."

While drum ownership is helpful, it's not a requirement. Champion provides some Djembe African drums covered in goat and mule skins and Haitian drums made of cow skin.

Sounds, including the tone, bass and hand slap, correct drum position, erect posture and proper breathing rank among the basic teachings.

"You've got a hump back, son, sit up straight," Champion said to a young boy, a novice drummer. "That wind has to come through you to keep it going. We have to pull the air into our bodies. Get extra breath when you feel weak and you can go on and on."



African drumming holds a rich and sacred history.

The Djembe drum, shaped like a drinking goblet, is called the healing drum, one of the most powerful drums in existence. It dates back to the 12th century Mali empire of West Africa and was the drum of the Mandingo people. Djembe drums are used today in Senegal, Mali, Sierra Leone, Ivory Coast, Gambia and Guinea. Historically, Djembes stand as sacred drums, used in healing ceremonies, rites of passage, warrior ritual, social dances and for communication.

Five students, along with Luming, Champion's wife, and his son Solomon, attended the first drum class. The small room vibrated as Champion told participants not to hold back, to drum harder and faster, to start out slower, roll higher, then quieter, louder and then quieter.

"You don't have to look at the drum. Tap your feet, watch other people, watch other feet," he said.

The drum classes continue for at least three more Saturdays, possibly more.

The classes at North Greenwood are the brainchild of Scott Dempster, recreation programmer at the Clearwater complex. He worked as a musician for 25 years, playing bass with Rock and Roll Hall of Famer Roger McGuinn, leader of the group The Byrds.

Prior to joining the North Greenwood staff, Dempster coordinated musical activities for the city during Sunsets at Pier 60 on Clearwater Beach. That's where he saw Champion

not only playing African drums but also joining Latin and salsa bands.

"When I got to North Greenwood and was faced with the task by my supervisor of having a plethora of activities here, I thought African drumming might be a way to go," Dempster said. "I tried a traditional drumming class first and didn't get anybody really interested."

He confidently predicts the African drum class will continue past the initial four weeks. But Dempster does hope for more participation from North Greenwood and the greater Clearwater community.

"I was kind of surprised that every participant at the first class was a non-resident, not from the Clearwater or Greenwood community. Instead they live in Dunedin or Seminole," Dempster said. "Now that we've got the class up and running, the idea is to get more people from this community interested."

First-time drummer Bob Schur of Dunedin called the first class "wonderful."

"I'm a musician but not a percussionist," Schur said. "I wanted to learn more about African rhythms. (Champion) is really good and made me feel real comfortable."

If you go

African Drum Class, Saturdays, noon-1 p.m., at North Greenwood Recreation Center, 900 N Martin Luther King Jr. Ave. Cost is \$40 with city of Clearwater recreation card for four weeks, or \$60 without recreation card for four weeks. Scholarships are available. For more information, call 462-6276.