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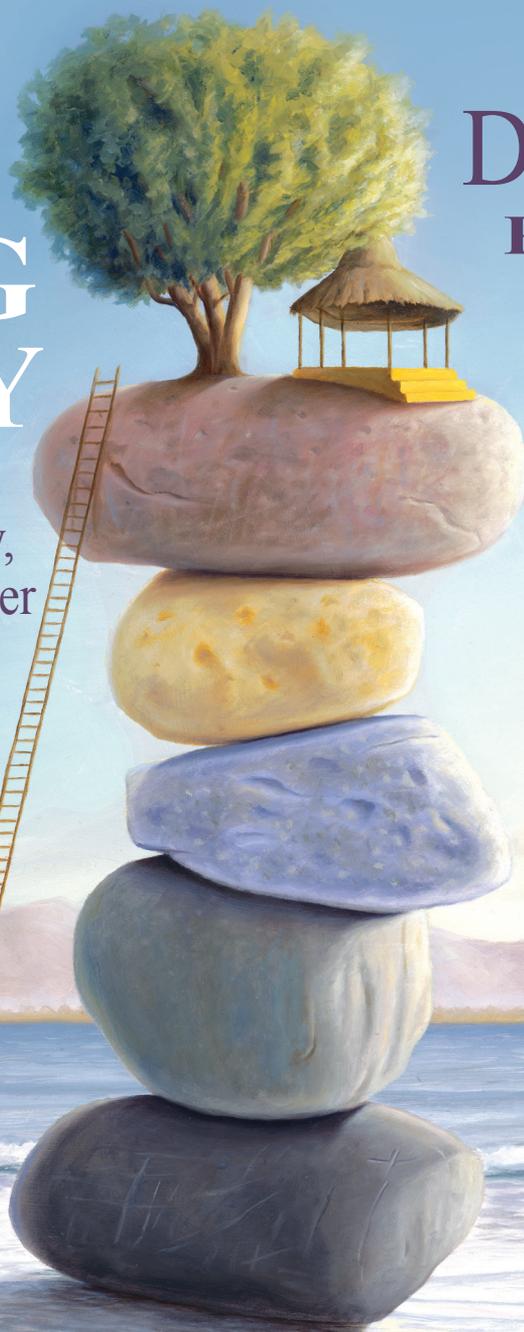
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Photo by Peter O'Hara

Rhythms of Life

Drum circles help connect us to the universe and the community

by Susan Bloom

The energy is intense, the beat infectious. Drum circles—involving a range of African and Latin-based drums such as congas, djembes, and doun douns played with the hands by a group—are helping to link people to the ancient origins of music. And they're bringing joy, relaxation, healing, and a sense of community to a broad range of participants from Sacramento to Succasunna.

According to experts, drum circles help enhance self-esteem, creativity, and focus, while the pure fun associated with the activity reduces stress and boosts energy. In his 1991 testimony before the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging, Grateful Dead drummer Mickey Hart had this to say: "The drum circle offers equality because it includes people of all ages and has no head or tail. The main objective [of participants] is to share rhythm and get in tune with each other and themselves...and a new, collective voice emerges from the group as they drum together." According to Hart, "A large part of music's power and pleasure comes from its ability to reconnect us with the deeper rhythms that we're not conscious of, giving music the power to heal, open up channels of communication, and foster community and family."

No one knows this better than North Jersey-based professional drummer Chuck Wood, who both leads drum circles and performs and tours

nationally as half of the guitar-and-percussion duo Dhamaru, whose name refers to the sacred Tibetan hand drum. The 51-year-old Hackettstown resident, whose lifelong passion for drumming began early on with a set of his mother's pots and pans, recalls being mesmerized by the driving rhythms of Jose Chepito Areas's drum work in Santana as a teenager and later by African teachers playing hand drums like the djembe (pronounced "jem-bay"). "The music fed me so much and was so healing," Wood reveals. "Once I'd been introduced to the djembe drum and traditional African music, it turned the page back to the origins of Latin rhythms, back to the ancient source, and it just knocked me out."

Wood describes the feeling of playing in a drum circle as "extremely open, like a vessel. It forces you to be very sensitive and truly in the moment, and then all of this magic happens as you embody the rhythm and the music starts to come through you. Playing helps activate you and sends out vibra-



tions which get deep down on the cellular level. Once your mind starts to let go, it's extremely relaxing, almost like being in a meditative state."

Glen Ridge resident Cari Jones, 24, who has taken drum lessons and participated in drum circles for the past two years, feels that the practice has been invaluable to her profession as a dancer and singer. "Drumming helps connect me to the universe and keeps the rhythm steady in my body and mind," she says. "Plus, the energy is crazy, and it's so much fun."

"Rhythm is so much a part of the universe and the human experience, activated at the very beginning of our existence from the time we feel the pulse of our mother's heartbeat in the womb," Wood says. "As a result, drumming and responding to drums is such a natural thing to do. When you participate in a drum circle and the drums lock in a rhythm and the music comes together, you become aware that there's this positive energy being sent out that comes back to you, an energetic loop that feeds on itself. Drumming is totally accessible, it provides a connection back to the source, and it truly brings a sense of community and commonality."



For drumming lessons or to book Dhamaru or see their upcoming performance schedule, visit Myspace.com/dhamaru, call Chuck Wood at 908-852-6172, or email him at CWood59@verizon.net. Dhamaru's new CD is available at CDBaby.com.

Freelancer Susan Bloom writes weekly Health and Food features for New Jersey's Asbury Park Press and specializes in topics related to nutrition, fitness, and healthy lifestyles.



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