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# RAPPER'S deLITE

This couple danced their way to slimmer frames, losing a combined 160 pounds

By RAQUEL LANERI

IT'S Monday night, and the studio at Alvin Ailey in Hell's Kitchen is bumping. A Missy Elliott song blares from the speakers as 30 hip-hop enthusiasts — ranging from 20-somethings to unassuming moms — high-step, glide and crisscross their arms. But the most enthusiastic booty-shakers are Joseph Laino and George Junco, two middle-aged psychotherapists having the time of their lives. “The first time I said I wanted to try hip-hop, George was like, ‘You’re crazy!’” says 49-year-old Laino, who was already taking Zumba classes at Ailey with Junco, his partner of 26 years. “But it ended up being life-changing.”

The Sunset Park-based couple sweat it out at Ailey five times a week, dabbling in everything from hip-hop to house. Dancing has not only enhanced their social life, it's also bolstered their health, with the pair losing nearly 160 pounds collectively in two years.

“I was a 50 waist, maybe 52, when I first started,” says Junco, 55. “Now I’m a 36.”

Laino and Junco met in 1990 while working for a local youth shelter. Both men grew up in large immigrant families who spent weekends playing music and dancing, and the two bonded over that shared passion. Date nights included watching the New York City Ballet at Lincoln Center, then grooving at a nightclub downtown. But then graduate



Junco (left) and Laino each gained 100 pounds, and suffered from health issues, in the first 10 years of their relationship.

school, work and settling down took over.

“Our lives got so busy that dancing just kind of fell by the wayside,” says Laino.

So did maintaining their trim waistlines. Sedentary hours working and studying meant late-night snacking and a dependence on fast food.

“I gained like 10 pounds a year the first 10 years we were together,” Laino says. “All of a sudden I was 100 pounds overweight. I was like, ‘Oh my god! How did this happen?’”

Both men had health issues, too. Junco, who had also gained about 100 pounds in those first 10 years, had suffered from high blood pressure since his 20s. In 2008, Laino was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes, and by 2014, his health was dire. “My endocrinologist was like, ‘You have got to start moving!’” he says.

A couple weeks later, as he and Junco were leaving a performance by the Alvin Ailey Company, Laino saw a flier advertising Zumba classes on Sunday mornings. Junco was skeptical, but Laino decided to give it a whirl.

“I absolutely loved it. I went home and said, ‘George, this was like the best thing ever — you have got to come!’”

“The first time I took it, halfway through the class I thought I was going to have a heart attack,” says Junco. But he was back the next week.

A month later, Laino suggested the couple try hip-hop, then house dancing. (He sticks with the street styles, while Junco has expanded his repertoire to include Afro-Cuban and ballet styles.)

All that moving had a big impact on their physiques: Junco, who also keeps track of what he eats through Weight Watchers, has shed 118 pounds and had his blood-pressure meds halved; Laino has lost 40 pounds, regulated his glucose levels, and can better manage his diabetes.

Their passion has also brought them together. “Dancing was something we had in common right from the beginning, but we lost track of that love,” says Laino.

“To be able to find it again and find it together and to feel good doing it has been just terrific.”

George Junco (left) and Joseph Laino bust a move at Alvin Ailey five times a week, taking classes ranging from hip-hop to Zumba.