



## STEALTH DYNAMO

TRAINER, ENTREPRENEUR, PHILANTHROPIST, AUTHOR—RUPA MEHTA PACKS MANY ROLES INTO HER BARELY FIVE-FOOT FRAME. BY REBECCA JOHNSON.

Every age gets the guru it deserves. Just two years ago, Rupa Mehta, whose fast-paced regimen mixing light weights, Pilates, and barre work had earned her a devoted following on Manhattan's Upper West Side, was poised to become the next big thing in the fitness world. Taking her Nalini Method national in partnership with

Equinox would be the fulfillment of a lifelong dream for the then 31-year-old entrepreneurial MBA, the daughter of hardworking Indian immigrants who came to America to give their children the best shot at success. There was just one problem. Mehta was not happy.

"It tore me up to walk away," she says, sitting in the sun-filled lobby of her new space on the far West Side of the city. "I am an ambitious girl and

I want to grow things, but I knew the corporate world was not right for me." Just as she had chucked a magazine job a few years earlier to become a fitness teacher, she chucked the Equinox deal, reopened her own studio, and decided also to focus on the fitness needs of disadvantaged children in the New York City public schools.

Feeling the urge to do good is nothing new. "Lots of *fitness* >226

people want to volunteer on an occasional Saturday morning, and that's great," says Wendy Dessy, the City Hall official who met with Mehta to design the program, now running in two Brooklyn schools, with hopes to expand. "But what Rupa is doing goes above and beyond. When she walks into that room, it's magic. Those kids light up."

Watching Rupa Mehta work with her regular clientele, a mix of sleek professionals and supertoned stay-at-home moms, you can easily see how she rose to the top of the fitness world. A former teacher at the legendary Lotte Berk studio, Mehta keeps the weights low and the pace fast. There's a Ganesh elephant statue over the door to the equipment closet, a nod to her Hindu parents (the method is named after her mother, Nalini),

don't want to obsess about every calorie," she says. "You walk into some of those places and it's all about the size of your rock or what kind of bag you're carrying. I decided to get rid of all that stuff. You can come late, leave early. Everyone's name is on the wall, so the instructor always knows who you are. I really wanted that chilled atmosphere."

Chilled should not be confused with relaxed. Her workout is hard. And effective. "Come for a month, and you'll see a difference in your upper body," she promises. And the lower body? "More complicated," she admits.

More complicated still is her work with the middle school students, many of whom struggle with learning or behavioral disabilities. Before she gets them moving, she tries to get them talking based on *Connect to Your One*, the book she wrote outlining her philosophy of life, exercise, and the way our emotions can weigh us down.

## "REALIZING THAT EXERCISE CAN HELP CHILDREN DEAL WITH SOME OF THE STRESS IN THEIR LIVES HAS BEEN HUGE FOR THEM"

but the sound track is pure pop. Rihanna is no match for Mehta's booming voice, a surprise given she stands barely five feet tall. "I am small," she admits, "but in my mind, I'm six foot six." Mine, too. When she told me to stand up straight, I did. More surprisingly, I didn't hate her for barking at me, something she attributes to her size. "I don't think I could run around the room yelling at people the way I do if I was tall," she says. "I get away with a lot because of my size."

Mehta may not have invented the no-impact, fast-paced barre classes that have become so popular among women seeking the long, lean look of a dancer, but she is a master at keeping them exciting by constantly adding new props. "The muscles," she says, "like to be surprised." More important, she was determined to create a place where everybody who comes through the door feels welcome, regardless of their shape or status. "I think it's OK to eat a hamburger. I

"What are some words we hear in our lives that don't make us feel good?" she asked, standing at the head of the classroom on the day I observed.

The children slumped in their seats. "Stupid," one said. "Dumb," another added. "Retarded," a third chimed in. It was enough to break your heart.

But half an hour later, those same children were giddily egging one another on in a contest to see who could do the most sit-ups or hold the plank position the longest. In the back of the classroom, their teacher, Eileen McManus, beamed with pride. "Realizing there is a connection between the mind and the body, and that exercise can help them deal with some of the stress in their lives, has been huge for them," she says.

The transformation goes both ways. "I am," says Mehta, "a healthier and happier person for having known these kids." □ *health >230*

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