At first glance the early morning scene at the Peadeart Park in Brooklyn is misleading. And hearing Caribbean music like the soca classic “Movin” only adds to the confusion of what sounds like a “trini-style” carnival party taking place. But on closer examination the true nature of the group “movin’ to the left and movin’ to the right” is revealed. It is a free community outdoor exercise program organized by Sesame Flyers International, Inc (SFI). And the sound emanating from the park is the music that drives the participants in what is they call – socarobics.

SFI is a multi service community-based organization catering to the needs of youth and adults in Brooklyn. The agency provides a comprehensive, holistic strategy to youth and community development with culture an art at its core.

But to many Brooklyn residents, the fun-filled exercise program has been their way of staying in shape for the 12 years since the classes started. Each morning during the spring and summer months, more than 200 residents of all ages converge on the park located in the East Flatbush section of Brooklyn for a 90-minute workout to the pulsating rhythms of authentic Caribbean soca and calypso music.

The class is conducted by a charismatic instructor, Matthew Griffith, who has earned his stripes as “The Miracle Man,” due to the success stories of some participants, which some call nothing short of a miracle. Griffith is a former soccer and volleyball player who took over the exercise program, which was formerly a small in-
discard her walking stick after two months of working out with us. And then there is the 90-year-old grandmother who started off slow but is now able to keep pace with her younger classmates. It is their success which inspires me," he says.

The socarobics class begins the Monday following Mother's Day each year and runs Monday to Friday 6:30-8:00 a.m. until September.

The program is made possible with funds from area Assemblyman Nick Perry, who is an ardent supporter of community health. "The Sesame Flyers exercise program is one that we are proud of at my office because it is beneficial on so many levels other than the obvious one of keeping people in shape," says Perry. "The cost of a gym membership is prohibitive to many people, especially in these challenging economic times. A free exercise class that provides an adequate alternative is something that we can all embrace."

Curtis Nelson, executive director of SFI was instrumental in getting the program off the ground in 2001. "I am proud of the way the program has grown over the years and for the opportunity we have to provide this service to the community," he says.

Raymond Luke, the Association's chairman, embraced it as an opportunity to show that Sesame Flyers is more than just masquerade and steelband. "Though we are very proud of our achievements as a champion of Labor Day Caribbean Carnival band and winners on a dozen occasions, the fact is we are a full-fledged community service organization," says Luke. "This exercise program is just one of the many services we provide annually as a way of building our community and making it a better place to live, work and raise a family."

Founded in 1983, SFI was born out of what Trinidadians call a "lime" with good friends and family at a house on Sesame Place & Irving Street in Petit Bourg, Trinidad. This was followed by a dinner discussion in New York City and subsequently an idea to form an organization put forward by founder Joseph Charles. The initial meetings and youth workshops were held in kitchens, basements, backyards of members and in Prospect Park on Sunday mornings.

Recognized as one of the top eight youth community programs in New York City, SFI programs include academic support, recreational programs, counseling services, cultural events, summer youth employment, computer literacy and job readiness.

Over the past 29 years, the organization has enriched its name and recognition in New York’s cultural community by winning the "Band of The Year" title in the West Indian American Day Carnival Parade consecutively from 1999-2009. They again capped the title in 2011 and as the defending champions, are actively preparing for this year's Caribbean Carnival on Eastern Parkway with their presentation of Fire & Ice.

So if you are looking to get in shape this summer, there is still time to "move to the left; move to right" and catch the socarobics fever. ■

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American Heart Association

I am 29 years young and have had open heart surgery. Two years ago, I had to have my mitral valve repaired to reverse my diagnosis of borderline congestive heart failure due to an enlarged heart caused by severe mitral valve prolapse. I stumbled upon the notification that I needed to have open heart surgery during my internship as a cardiac ultrasonographer. I was asymptomatic and probably would not have known today that my life was indeed threatened had I not received the important exam called an echocardiogram.

I have been interested in the cardiovascular system and cardiovascular health for quite some time since two very important people in my life have suffered from heart disease, one fatally. However, I never imagined heart disease would directly affect me and have such a major impact on me personally.

As a result, my interest has now grown into passion about the movement and the fight to end heart disease. I wish to get involved with the American Heart Association in hopes of spreading awareness and to educate the youth that this disease affects all ages and in some cases can be a silent attacker. My hope is to relay the message to the young that it is essential to prioritize heart health. I am blessed to be here and to be able to share my story so that possibly one more life can be saved in return.

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