

UNM Professor Revels in Fitness, Teaching and Learning

By [Amanda Schoenberg/Journal Staff Writer](#) on Sunday, May 8, 2011 · [Leave a Comment](#)

Professor Len Kravitz leads an exercise class at UNM. (Richard Pipes/Journal)

In professor Len Kravitz's office at 2:15 p.m. on a Tuesday are three students, a reporter and enough equipment to outfit a small gym, including six exercise balls.

Kravitz, an exercise science professor at the University of New Mexico, is wearing a signature "flamboyant" shirt and bolo tie. He is seated on one of the exercise balls, which squeaks as he rolls back and forth.

"I never stop moving," he admits.

The phrase that comes to mind when you meet Kravitz is high-energy — an approach that extends to meeting with students, teaching or researching a new fitness trend. He loves what he does and it shows.

"Fitness has given me so much," he says, adding that it has allowed him to travel all over the world. "I want to give back."

"I express my passion at the same level that I hold it," he adds. "When I love something, I just have the unbelievable desire to express it."

Kravitz, 58, an international fitness expert, also has been a gymnast, mime artist and aerobics instructor. He maintains a breakneck pace as a speaker, attending about 35 conferences a year in the U.S. and Canada, as well as a few in places like Spain and Australia.

He has written more than 200 peer-reviewed articles, covering every topic imaginable, from stretching to body mass index. His book, "Anybody's Guide to Total Fitness," is now in its ninth edition.

"Dr. Kravitz is the king of multi-tasking," says Rosie Lanphere, a graduate student in exercise science at UNM. "Even if you're talking with him one-on-one, you'll take a walk around the gym. He's always on the move."

Name a fitness trend and Kravitz has probably done it, written an article on it or taught a class about it. In fact, he has ridden many of the biggest fitness waves of the past 30 years.



Expert advice

Kravitz started teaching high-impact fitness classes but saw a growing number of injuries. Along with other colleagues, he then added low-impact training. Then, he started to add creative movements, like hand weights, to his classes.

As step aerobics grew in popularity, Kravitz spread the word, as an instructor, in a workout video and in his doctoral research about the workout.

“It was a neat role for me,” he says. “I could teach it, then give the research.”

Kravitz still tracks the latest trends. Companies also send him their latest exercise equipment to test, which explains the gym in his office.

He now predicts more workouts combining functional and traditional routines.

His ability to forecast and research trends is remarkable, says Kathie Davis, co-founder of IDEA Health and Fitness Association, the largest trade organization for fitness professionals.

“He is an expert in his field,” Davis says. “There’s no one who has a better read on what the next fitness trend is going to be.”

Lawrence Biscontini, a mindful movement specialist, author and fitness DVD personality, calls Kravitz a mentor, friend and colleague, “the pulse” of the fitness community.

“To bypass the fluff, the bad, the ugly, the hype, this man separates the valid, research-based information from the mere speculation,” Biscontini, who divides his time between New York and Greece, writes in an email. He has adapted Kravitz’s own rigorous research methods, including using only peer-reviewed, published and refereed studies.

Kravitz led a class at IDEA’s first convention in 1984 and has presented nearly every year since.

From his first class, “everyone loved him,” Davis says. “He was fantastic, motivating, upbeat.” Fast-forward 28 years and Kravitz’s talks are still packed.

In applied fitness circles, “he is a total rock star,” says Dr. Christine Mermier, who coordinates UNM’s exercise physiology lab and works with employee health promotion.

In his work, Kravitz translates complex research into language non-academics can understand, Davis says.

“He’s very discerning,” she says. “He can really separate out the fact from the fiction for the reader.”

A young gymnast

Born in Albuquerque, Kravitz was a gymnast from seventh grade through his undergraduate years at UNM. After graduating from UNM he moved to California and worked as a fitness instructor. He was known for specialty classes, choosing music and movements for themes like Halloween.

“Those classes were what super-launched me,” he says. “They were just so fun.”

Aerobics classes were the catalyst for his lifelong interest in fitness, Kravitz says. In the early days he often finished his classes with impromptu acrobatic feats.

“All of a sudden, I’d do a back flip,” he says.

While earning a master’s degree at San Jose State University he took a pantomime class. After his teacher asked him to join her, he spent the next few years performing on weekends to pay for his degree.

He returned to UNM for a Ph.D. in exercise science and health promotion. After teaching fitness for years, he saw firsthand the benefits of exercise. He decided to pursue the doctorate degree to understand the complexities of the human body.

“I really wanted to understand why the body benefited so much,” he says. “How and why were the two words. That really was my drive to go back and study.”

Ask about Kravitz’s exercise ball and you get a glimpse into his teaching methods.

A former student created a game with the ball. Puzzle pieces drawn on the ball answer physiology questions. Myosin, for example, is the protein in muscles that causes them to contract, says Kravitz.

His office is full of similar work.

For a recent project, Kravitz asked students to write books with 10 chapters on resistance training. He often helps students hone writing skills and is the second author on many student publications.

His enthusiasm grows as he looks at each book.

“I’m just so impressed with this,” he says. “I will always do this. It totally shows their creativity.”

His own routine

As a professor, Kravitz says his goal is to empower students.

Mermier, who has known Kravitz since his Ph.D. days, calls him an “energetic and inclusive” teacher.

Graduate student Lanphere, who co-teaches an exercise physiology class with Kravitz, says she applies many of the skills she learns from Kravitz in her own classes.

He keeps students engaged and puts great effort into preparing for class, she says.

In addition to his own research, Kravitz teaches three classes each semester at UNM, including a methods class where he shows students how to teach exercise.

In one recent class, he combined step aerobics and resistance band training. Along the way, he called out encouragement and explained which muscles students were using. He also used silly voices, making students giggle.

“Probably in most institutions, they would leave that to the graduate students,” says Mermier. “He is really different in that way. He’s enthusiastic about it. He loves it. He doesn’t want to stop doing it.”

Kravitz, who is engaged to a personal trainer who lives in New Jersey, has an unusual fitness routine. He goes to sleep at about 8 p.m. and wakes up at 12:15 a.m.

After eating a little fruit, he searches online lectures on biology, chemistry or physics. For 40 minutes he will watch a lecture and “walk, walk, walk around the house.” If a lecture is particularly interesting, he walks in place.

Then he works out on his Bowflex machine, spending about 15 minutes working his arms, legs or chest. Everyday he focuses on a different area to keep himself challenged.

By the time he starts his Monday methods class at 8 a.m., he has been up nearly eight hours and, by all appearances, has more energy than most of his students.

“My philosophy is the road to health and fitness has no finish line,” he says.

He wants people to constantly challenge themselves through exercise.

Cells respond to multiple stimuli, he says. The same is true for our bodies.

“The best thing we can do is give our bodies multiple stimuli,” he says.

“You need strength, you need the cardiovascular work, you need flexibility.”