



Joyce Shahboz with her husband, Marc, and daughters Lain, 11, and Gwenny, 8, at Darkside Athletics and F2 Arena gymnasium, where she works out.

# AMERICAN NINJA MOM

All the world's a gym for physical therapist Joyce Shahboz, who proves her "warrior" credentials on the popular obstacle-course game show... and on the home front

STORY BY DIANA TONNESSEN  
PHOTO BY DOUG FINGER

Joyce Shahboz insists she's "just a mom." But this summer, the 42-year-old physical therapist and mother of two from Gainesville joined 299 elite athletes from all over the country, including former gymnasts, Olympic gold medalists, aerial artists, NCAA champions and professional stunt men and women, to compete in the 2013 season of NBC's popular "American Ninja Warriors" obstacle-course game show.

"I was the only mom out there this year," says Shahboz, whose agile 5-foot, 6-inch frame and easygoing personality belie the athletic powerhouse within.

In 2012—her first year as a contestant—Shahboz completed more obstacles in the regional meet than all but one other female contestant nationwide. She outperformed 60 of the 96 male contestants in Miami, as well—including her husband, Marc Shahboz. (Only about 10 percent of all American Ninja Warrior contestants are women, who compete on the same course as the men.)

"When I hit the jump-hang obstacle, the producers said to Marc, 'She's just tied Luci—she's gone the farthest of any woman,'" Joyce recalls.

Luci Steel Romberg is a professional stunt woman who lives in California.

This year, Joyce made game-show history for being the first woman to make back-to-back finals in the American edition of the show.

Not bad for a woman whose only competitive team sports in high school were flag-twirling and rifle, and who says she couldn't do a pull-up until she was 30 years old.

How did she do it?

Shahboz, who is originally from Fort Walton Beach, describes herself as "a tomboy" who has always been physically active. She didn't get serious about sports until she was a senior in college at UF in 1993, when she took up martial arts.

"Once I got into karate, I started stepping it up a little bit," she says. "It was just setting a goal and going for it. I always tell people, 'You don't need to be athletic to do a pull-up or a push-up. You just need to be persistent.'"

That's also when she met Marc.

"I met him at a bike shop," says Joyce, who was working on her green belt in karate at the time. "I always joke that during our first week of dating, I picked him up and threw him."

Marc Shahboz is a UF alumnus with a master of fine arts degree from UF.

He now teaches video production and design at Santa Fe College's multi-media program. He says that after meeting Joyce, he decided to take up karate, too, "to protect myself." They've been together ever since. They have two daughters: Lain, 11, and Gwenny, 8.

The couple started watching American Ninja Warriors about 10 years ago. They often joked about being on the show themselves, but never seriously considered trying out. Then, in 2011, one of the show's regular contestants, Drew Drechsel, became one of Joyce's physical therapy patients at the Orthopaedic Institute after he blew out his knee while competing in the Ninja Warrior finals in Japan. The following season, Drechsel encouraged Marc and Joyce to submit a video and try out for the show. The Shahbozes were selected out of a pool of about 8,000 applicants nationwide.

This year, only Joyce made it back onto the show for a second shot at the \$500,000 grand prize and the coveted "American Ninja Warrior" title.

During the competition, each contestant must

**NAME:** Joyce Shahboz

**AGE:** 42

**OCCUPATION:** Physical therapist at the Orthopaedic Institute

**FAMILY:** Marc Shahboz, husband; Lain, 11; Gwenny, 8

**YEARS IN GAINESVILLE:** 16 years

**CHALLENGE:** Finding time to work out and stay fit enough to compete on NBC's "American Ninja Warrior" game show while raising a family.

**WHAT'S WORKING:** Realizing that I don't need to spend an hour or two hours working out as long as I make the best use of the time I have—even if it's just 20 minutes.

**BEST TIP:** Start small and set realistic goals. "If you hold a plank, that'll turn into a push-up. And one push-up will turn into 10."

Continued on Page 125 >>>

**AMERICAN NINJA**  
Continued from Page 45

complete a series of tough — some might label them ‘impossible’—physical challenges, such as scaling a “warped wall,” or jumping off a trampoline and then landing between two vertical walls using their hands and feet for support (the “jumping spider”), or using two hand-held pegs for support as they cross a giant “pegboard” suspended horizontally over a pool of water.

“We’ve seen really good athletes go down two steps into the course, and these are people I know—from an athletic standpoint—are way more athletic than I am,” Joyce says. “Parkours, Olympic gold medalists, NFL football players...a wide spectrum of people.”

So what’s the secret of Shahboz’ success?

“I guess what helped me out with Ninja Warriors is that I’ve done a little bit of everything,” she says. “Sometimes I swim. Sometimes I go to the rock gym.” She also has participated in competitive swing dancing, mountain-bike racing and master swimming. Her latest endeavor: belly dancing.

“I’ve got sports ADD” (attention deficit disorder), she says with a laugh.

She also sets realistic goals for herself—and encourages others to do the same.

How does Shahboz find the time to work part-time, work out all the time, serve as the strength and conditioning coach for High Tide Aquatics (a club swim team) and keep up with the busy schedules of her two daughters, who also swim competitively? Whenever other parents or her patients ask that question, Shahboz replies that when it comes to doing what’s necessary to stay healthy and fit, “You’re not going to ‘find’ time. You’re going to have to ‘make’ time.”

“If you’re waiting 15 minutes to pick up your kids from school, stand next to your car and do a couple of squats, or lean up against the car and do some push-ups.”

It helps that, for Shahboz, all the world’s a gymnasium—from the pull-up bar hanging in her house to the teeter-totters on the playground at her daughter’s school to the stunt trampoline she keeps in her backyard.

“I think a lot of it is getting it out of your head that you have to go to the gym for an hour,” she says. “Sometimes it’s just finding something to do in the few minutes that you do have.”

“If you’re waiting 15 minutes to pick up your kids from school, stand next to your car and do a couple of squats, or lean up against the car and do some push-ups,” Shahboz suggests. If you sit at a desk all day at work, give your body a needed posture break by walking up and down the stairs five times. Or sit in your chair and do some push-ups and leg-lifts. Or sit down and stand up 20 times in the chair before having dinner.

“I call those my ‘guilt’ workouts—I know I’m not going to make it to the gym today so I’m going to do 20 of these and 20 of those and call it a day and be happy that I did something,” she says. “Just make it fun and break it up throughout the day.”

“Being healthy isn’t about being athletic,” Shahboz says. “It’s about being persistent. Not everybody likes it, but it’s like brushing your teeth. Nobody wakes up in the morning and says, ‘I love to brush my teeth!’ But you know you’ve got to brush your teeth.”

Private companies, such as 23andMe, now offer genetic testing direct to the consumer. Today’s tests won’t provide a crystal-clear view of all your potential genetically-linked health risks. But it is information you can have now, before you need it.

**DR. JULIE JOHNSON**  
Continued from Page 47

was more than her body could tolerate and it took weeks to establish the correct dosage. The perfect dose turned out to be just what the researcher had predicted.

How can you educate yourself about your own genetic makeup?

Johnson says that advancements in genotyping and gene sequencing technology have been extraordinary. The human genome project completed in 2001 took about 13 years and cost more than \$3 billion to map out more than 20,000 human genes. Now you can do a whole human genome sequence now within a day for less than \$1,000.

Private companies, such as 23andMe, now offer genetic testing direct to the consumer. Genetic testing on newborns can be done with a simple heel stick.

Today’s tests won’t provide a crystal-clear view of all your potential genetically-linked health risks. But it is information you can have now, before you need it, Johnson says.

Johnson says that while a vast majority of genetic information in the human genome is identical for all of us, researchers have identified some differences in our genetic data. And though many of these genetic variations remain a mystery, a few of them can predict certain health risks.

For example, BRCA1 and BRCA2, genetic markers for breast cancer, have been in the news after Angelina Jolie

revealed she had a double mastectomy based on her genetic predisposition for the disease.

Several hundred genetic tests are currently in use, with more being developed every day.

For disease risk, the most predictive markers to date are for cancers, but there are a lot of data on more common chronic diseases, such as diabetes, depression, hypertension or rheumatology.

“We are doing discovery work now,” Johnson says, and one of the challenges is to educate health practitioners to use that genetic information.”

In medicine, the average time to disseminate information is historically about 20 years, according to Johnson. It took that long to spread the idea of taking aspirin after a heart attack. Now no matter where you get treated, you’ll probably get aspirin after a heart attack.

Gainesville residents may have a jump on that two-decade educational curve because we live in a town with an academic medical center, Johnson says.

Currently UF Health patients are invited to participate in the research program that stores their genetic data. The program will move from the academic health center to private cardiologists and then to small community hospitals.

“We will learn more with each new step,” Johnson promises.

“We want to move the knowledge base so that you’ll have that personal genetic information, and then assure that it works in the health system,” she says. “You start with evidence and then move toward acceptance.”