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Gerri Topfer is bringing yoga to the masses,
meeting groups included



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Yoga helps meeting attendees stay engaged
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Paoni Eisner, executive director, (left);
Geni Rypler, founder, Kula for Karma

Visionaries

Gerri Topfer and Penni Feiner are bringing yoga to the masses—meeting groups included—and turning the starkest of spaces into dens of tranquility

By Andrea Doyle

Photography by Matthew Furman

Yoga calms, centers, and grounds. It relaxes yet rejuvenates and helps meeting groups become more productive, explains Geri Topfer, founder of Kula for Karma, a non-profit group that offers yoga to anyone whose spirit has been challenged by illness, abuse, neglect, addiction, or another obstacle in life.

Walter Kalman, executive director of the New Jersey chapter of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), agrees. He includes yoga in the annual conference he plans for the organization. "As someone who personally practices yoga, I know how relaxing it can be," he says. He had Topfer and Penni Feiner, Kula for Karma's executive director, lead two yoga sessions at last year's conference and has them on deck again for this year.

When Topfer and Feiner are not in meeting rooms, they can be found in prisons, veterans' centers, hospitals, homeless shelters, group homes for at-risk abused youth, and senior centers.

It's amazing to watch the two transform the recreation room in a women's

prison, with its cold gray cement floor and humming fluorescent lights, into a serene space filled with the sound of Feiner's heartfelt chants and the calming scent of lavender.

Even the most daunting of prisoners, toughened from years on the street, don't unnerve the two, who return weekly, bringing the benefits of yoga with them.

"It's easy to have compassion for the victim, but real yoga is having compassion for the perpetrator," says 49-year-old Topfer, exuding the positive energy that defines her.

Yoga has been transformational to both Topfer and Feiner and they now use it to help others. Kula for Karma was founded by Topfer three years ago. In the world of yoga, "kula" means community and karma means doing good deeds for others. But Topfer and Feiner weren't always so centered.

Using Yoga to Give Back

To an outside observer, Topfer seemed to have it all. A husband, Steven, an anesthesiologist at Hackensack University Medical Center; three beautiful chil-

dren; and a career in the magazine publishing world—yet she was overcome with anxiety. An acting coach recommended that Topfer, a shallow breather, try yoga to help her with deeper, more deliberate breath. She was willing to try anything to find inner peace.

"During my very first class I fell madly in love with yoga. It saved me and continues to save me every day. I have a lot of anxiety and fear, but now I just charge right through it," says Topfer, who started to practice regularly, became a certified teacher, and then looked to take her practice in an unconventional direction.

"A traditional yoga studio didn't resonate with me. I wanted to use my yoga in a deeper way, to give back."

It just so happened that her yoga teacher had just returned from Ecuador, where she taught yoga in an orphanage, and was planning to go back. "I told her there are kids struggling in our own backyard that we can help," says Topfer. This was the seed that led to the creation of Kula for Karma.

One of their first efforts was at a group home for abused teens. Feiner, a

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Kundalini Research Institute-certified yoga teacher who is also certified to teach restorative and LifeForce Yoga, was teaching a class when Topfer dropped in with a birthday cake for one of the teens. This was the first time the two met and the connection was immediate.

Yoga helped 58-year-old Feiner overcome a drug addiction. An avid athlete, she turned to yoga to help develop flexibility. "I never thought I'd be able to use the tools of yoga to help quiet my mind. My demons will always be there, but they don't shout anymore. Yoga has allowed me to get my arms around all of the stuff I like about me as well as the stuff I don't like," she explains.

Kula for Karma has now grown to include more than 40 programs and 260 certified teachers.

Each yoga class is designed to meet the needs of those they are teaching. "In dealing with the communities we deal with, it's not all about utilizing a specific pose. It's about integrating the whole mind and body experience," says Feiner.

Calm Conferences

For meeting groups, the two teach the transformational benefits of what it means to "take a breath." Most important, they emphasize the value of being in the moment, especially useful during a meeting. They charge meeting groups \$150 per hour per teacher.

The two kicked off last year's NASW's New Jersey chapter's conference in Atlantic City with a Sunday

night yoga practice followed by one Monday morning. "We did restorative yoga in the evening to help the group get a good night's sleep and then flow yoga in the morning to help them get going without Starbucks," says Feiner.

This conference consists of three intensive days of workshops and classes, as many are earning continuing education credits. "Geri and Penni are awesome, and although I'm all over the place I did stick my head in their session and totally got the vibe," says Kalman. "Our attendees who did participate in the yoga thought they were terrific."

Episcopal Social Services, a community outreach program, recently invited the two to speak about Kula for Karma. "As the group entered the room many were still stressed from the commute in. Although we hadn't planned it, we decided on the spot to do a little yoga with them before we got started. We turned off the lights, did some breathwork and stretching, and the entire energy in the room shifted. The group became open and receptive," explains Topfer.

To Rwanda

Kula for Karma's most ambitious journey to date took place last summer, when Topfer and Feiner visited Rwanda. They worked with women whose lives have been forever altered by the genocide that left an estimated 1 million people dead in 100 days in 1994. They trained those women who were identified as leaders in the community, with

the hope they would share the yoga and breathing techniques they learned with other women. At the end of each class the two handed out yellow t-shirts with the poem, "Imagine a Woman" printed in English on the front and translated into Kinyarwanda on the back.

The poem, by feminist theologian and poet Patricia Lynn Reilly, has become a Kula for Karma mantra. It begins, "Imagine a woman who believes it is right and good she is a woman. A woman who honors her experience and tells her stories. Who refuses to carry the sins of others within her body and life." It ends, "Imagine yourself as this woman."

Overcome with gratitude, the Rwandan women broke out in song, proclaiming, "Warakoze Mana, icyubahiro Ni icyawe," which translates into "Glory be to God, Thank you God, Praise be to God." Feiner, a gifted musician, was so taken by the song she memorized it and weaves it into a chant she uses during the classes she teaches.

"People refer to us as the crazy yoga ladies. We go into cafeterias and conference rooms that are dingy and dirty and transform them into sacred spaces. I couldn't imagine doing anything else. If I die tomorrow, I'll know I've tried to make a difference," Topfer says. SM



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