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Sharing yoga's benefits with those in need



TED AXELROD

Cristy Sycip is one of the high school volunteers teamed with autistic children in a yoga class organized by the non-profit Kula for Karma in Franklin Lakes.

Karma: Bringing the benefits of yoga to overlooked groups

By LIZ WHITE
SPECIAL TO THE RECORD

Incarcerated women gather on a Tuesday evening in the basement of a halfway house in Paterson. Teenage foster girls come together on a Thursday night in the parlor of their group home in Ridgewood. And on a Friday afternoon, young children with autism meet in a classroom at the Franklin Lakes Recreation Center. Their lives may be worlds apart, but they have this in common: For one hour each week, they are all in a place where the lights are dim, the music is soul-kisses and the scent of oil hanging in the air is sweet and soothing.

Participants, from seniors to autistic children, learn tools that may enhance their lives.

These rooms in the halfway house, group home and recreation center are transformed weekly into yoga studios, and the women, teens and children are learning to bend, physically and metaphorically, in new directions, transcending perceived limitations and learning tools that may enhance their lives.

These classes are the work of Kula for Karma, a 2001 profit organization that connects volunteer yoga teachers with communities such as these, as well as seniors, survivors of domestic violence and recovering addicts. Its founder, Franklin Lakes resident Geri Topfer, explains, "Kula is Sanskrit for *compassion*," and Kula for Karma is "the reconnection of karmic debts."

Topfer got started more than a year ago by brainstorming with Sheryl Edsall of Naturally Yoga in Glen Rock. They identified communities in need and invited other yoga teachers to take part. Young foster children were, and still are, based in Naturally Yoga, the flagship studio for Kula for Karma. Topfer works out the logistics of getting teachers to various locations. All classes are free and are modified to meet the needs of the groups they serve.

Cristy Sycip teaches the children with autism. They are mentored on an almost one-on-one basis by volunteer high school students. Sycip describes this branch of Kula as "fun yoga." She incorporates games, storytelling, visual meditation, deep breathing exercises

and relaxation through massage. "Everything the kids need is already inside of them, divine and perfect," says Sycip. "They just need to uncover it."

Sycip's class is a good fit for Madia Hansen's 5-year-old son, Anthony. "He's focused, he's flexible and he enjoys it," says Hansen, of Wyckoff.

Rosemarie Ogozalek sees the benefit for her daughter Halayna, also 5. "It's like occupational therapy," says the Mahwah mother. "It wakes up their bodies, helps them figure out where they are in space, and creates a brain-body connection. Yoga helps to take them out of their own little world back into our reality."

For the women at the halfway house, yoga is a welcome escape from reality. "Imagine being confined with 49 other women," one resident says. She describes how the dynamics fluctuate among the residents: "Some days, they're very supportive and nurturing, and other days, you just want to say, 'Get away from me, please.'" Another resident adds, "We're all here because we committed a crime, and we're trying to rectify that and get our lives back together."

Tara Steccato, who teaches the yoga class at the halfway house, sees the potential for

long-term benefit. "It's helping them to recognize the divine state of grace within them," she says. "Being here" — she gestures toward the halfway house from the sidewalk just outside — "what choice do they have?" Residents have limited and monitored movement in and out of the house, but Steccato adds, "They can go inside themselves [with yoga] and [learn the tools to deal with stress] before they get out."

Each Kula for Karma class is customized to meet the particular needs of the students. And on this Thursday night at the group home in Ridgewood, Pennil Felner, who teaches the teens, chooses her words as carefully as she selects the poses. "When you feel stuck or scared," she tells the girls, "just breathe. We're going as far as we can go. Wherever that is, is perfect."

Topfer is committed to taking Kula for Karma as far as it can go. "I started in my own backyard, Bergen County," says Topfer. "I want it to go national and even international. I want people to set up Kulas in their own communities."

The group will hold a fund raiser, "Kurtains Up, Kula for Karma," Nov. 10 at the Ridgewood Woman's Club. Information: 888-KARYOGA or KulaforKarma.org.



Gerl Topfer of Franklin Lakes, founder of Kula for Karma.

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