

Kollective Blessings of Yoga

KULA FOR KARMA

As Geri Topfer's vision unfolded, and began to be fulfilled through the work of their Kula angels, she and Penni Feiner created an innovative and distinctive Teacher Training Module, which was developed to ensure that each population served was instructed in such a way that reflects and embraces the uniqueness of their experience.

By Evan Pritchard

“When a volunteer becomes part of Kula for Karma, they get placed in a position to benefit others in need” - Geri Topfer

Geri Topfer and Penni Feiner are “Theresa-witzes” * on a mission: These two Jewish mamas are taking on New Jersey’s really tough spiritual jobs in a way that would have made India’s late Catholic saint Mother Theresa proud. Sharing the simple practice of yoga, they are giving back to spirit the second chance spirit gave them. They call their organization Kula for Karma. Kula is Sanskrit for community and Karma is Sanskrit for the way one good action leads to another. It is a community that turns passion into action, where others have failed, and that community is growing by leaps and by yogic stretches.

They bubble with enthusiasm and warmth about their work, making a difference in the world – one heart at a time. They wake up each morning to the smell of a higher coffee; to show those who have become trapped by life circumstance, that the path to freedom lies within them. For Geri Topfer and Penni Feiner, that path is called Anusara Yoga.

Anusara is a form of Kundalini yoga, or yoga of awareness. The benefits are both psychological and physiological. It carries with it a philosophy of non-judgment, and non-violence. Geri and Penni share that philosophy as a way of getting clients in the right frame of mind.

Anusara brings participants to a deeper state of meditation and inner peace via four different routes. One is through **asanas**, or postures and motions; practitioners use these motions as a form of meditation. Many kinetic people find that motion is the best way to get them to stop the chatter of the mind (Chitavriti) and meditate. The second is through **mudras**, hand positions and movements. This is especially effective with those in wheel-chairs. The third way is through **mantras**, chanting various syllables to keep the mind off of its problems long enough to slip into something more peaceful. The fourth and probably most important way is through **prana**, or breathing exercises, which both relax and train the body to breathe correctly according to its needs. These routes can be performed in any order, in combination, or one at a time.

Using these four modalities, Geri and Penni can pretty much tailor each class to the needs of any group. Although a session with the Theresa-witzes or their numerous trainees (now numbering 270 Kula Angels) may take an hour to complete, the real payoff – the profound state of inner peace and happiness that can bring brilliant mental clarity and make for insightful decisions about life – may only last five minutes. That’s all it takes for someone to turn their life around. And Kula for Karma’s clients are people in need of a life change. As one of them stated, “Yoga is like a shower for the mind!” Some are resistant the first session, because there is work involved on the mat. But that five minute natural high is so inviting that few complain the second time, and many formerly reticent groups now ask, “Can we do yoga more than once a week?” Some may even organize their own leaderless session’s midweek to get ready for their appointment with the Kula people.

Often, the five minute mental breakthrough also leads to an emotional breakthrough with tears and laughter. Kula trainees are prepared to deal with this. They allow clients a safe space to sit and cry on the mat, knowing that its benefits will be long-lasting. “This is the real stuff,” Geri says, and it makes a difference in the lives of those whom society has not been able to reach any other way, including those we tend to think of as throw-away lives; “prisoners, drug addicts and alcoholics in recovery, sex trafficking victims, and those in mental health facilities. It helps troubled people feel good about themselves and say, “I am okay! There’s nothing wrong with me!” This spiritual self-acceptance is an important step towards getting unstuck on the road to success, and Kula for Karma is a spiritual roadside emergency service. Geri feels that Prana or breath is the number one tool in their toolkit for mending

broken lives, and says, “Breathing is so important — that’s what we teach!”

Kula volunteers work with children as well – children with cancer, homeless and adoptive children, and children with AIDS. They are among the most receptive to yoga, and benefit greatly from its calming effects and healing methods. Kula also works with veterans and those with PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome) for whom the mind is a continuing battleground of memories. For these and other clients, Penni says mantras are very effective. Lokah samasta sukino khavantu is one she has taught to countless people caught up in the darkness of anger and separateness that clouds the mind and makes us sick inside. Translated it means “may everyone awaken to their innate, great perfection.” Penni feels these words help us overcome the “us versus them” trap. As she puts it, “We are all usses, we are all them!”

The Theresa-witzes recently made a trip to Rwanda to bring the benefits of Anasura yoga to many of its genocide survivors. Although few of their young clients could speak English, the team quickly learned to communicate with them through songs, dances, gifts, and of course, demonstrating poses. Kula’s volunteers saw tears turn to smiles in just a few days.

Geri says, “People are starving for this information; so many are struggling just to live their lives. Yoga gives us so much light – it saved Penni and me in the past and continues to save us every day, so we know the value of it, and want to share it.” Whether that’s in Rwanda or Hackensack, it makes no difference to them. For the last three years Geri and Penni have been honing their teaching and training techniques and now feel ready to steer a national organization that will bring the benefits of yoga to millions. That deserves an OM! ■

*Mother Therasas of Jewish extraction, their own humorous but aptly stated self-definition.

They currently serve fourteen distinct types of populations at risk in thirty-five different yoga programs, in almost as many locations around Northern New Jersey, Westchester, and New York City.

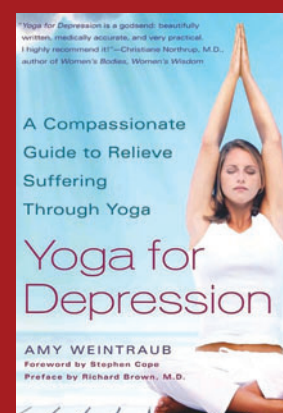
For more information or to donate:

Website: www.kulaforkarma.org

Video:

www.youtube.com/watch?v=6oNE7tzllVU&feature=player_embedded

Blog: www.blog.kulaforkarma.org



Recommended Reading:

The best-selling book *Yoga For Depression* by Amy Weintraub, explains how yoga has measurable medical and psychological benefits for those who truly apply it.