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## Spreading Karma

Gerri Topfer and Penni Feiner bring the healing hope of yoga to those who need it most.

by Andrea Doyle

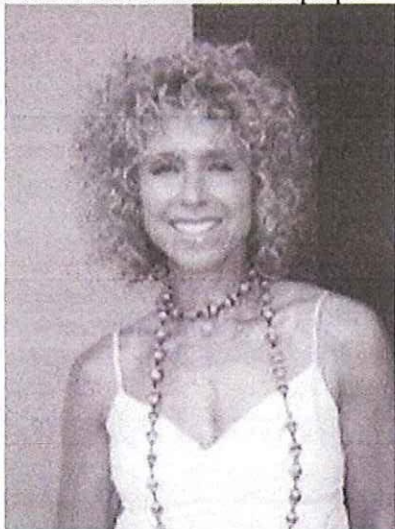


A hospital room is far from the typical yoga studio, but Gerri Topfer and Penni Feiner, the forces behind Kula for Karma, are not your typical instructors. Donning masks and gloves around patients with compromised immune systems, they teach breathing techniques and easy yoga poses, most of which can be done in bed. "It's hard to be serene here in the hospital, but yoga is helping me calm down and relax," says a young cancer patient from his bed.

When Gerri and Penni are not at a hospital, they can be found at similar places where stress runs high: women's prisons, drug treatment facilities, veterans' centers, homeless shelters, and group homes for at-risk youth. In the world of yoga, kula means "community" and karma means "doing good deeds for others." And that sums up Kula for Karma's mission precisely: to offer yoga, meditation, and other integrative healing practices for free to those who suffer from challenges such as illness, abuse, neglect, and addiction.

"We're a yoga studio without walls," explains Gerri, 49, of Franklin Lakes, who has been an instructor for 12 years, about the nonprofit organization she founded in 2007. After three years as program director, Penni, 58, of Hawthorne, became its executive director in September 2010.

Kula for Karma seeks to save people — a fitting tribute to the practice of yoga that saved both



women. Before she began yoga, Gerri seemingly had it all: She was a married mother of three who had a rewarding career in national magazine sales. Still, something was missing. She stumbled upon yoga after her acting teacher suggested it as a way to improve her shallow breathing. She booked a session with Sheryl Edsall at Naturally Yoga in Glen Rock, and, she says, "fell madly in love" with yoga during her first class. "It saved me and continues to save me. I have a lot of anxiety and fear but now I just charge right through it." In 2007, Gerri sought to spread the peace she had discovered with others. Inspired by Sheryl's recent trip to Ecuador, where she taught yoga at an orphanage, Gerri decided to similarly help — but in her own back yard.

Penni was one of the first yoga teachers to volunteer her services. Her connection with Gerri was immediate. Yoga had similarly helped Penni, who has been an instructor for seven years, achieve inner peace, but in a more profound way: It helped her overcome a drug addiction. An avid athlete and competitor, Penni didn't seek out yoga to help with her addiction, but rather to help her develop flexibility for her marathons and

long-distance bike rides. "I never thought I'd be able to use the tools of yoga to help quiet my mind," she says. "My demons will always be there, but they don't shout anymore."



Today, Kula for Karma has more than 40 programs in the tristate area, and it's still growing. There are 260 registered and certified teachers who volunteer their time. Each class is specifically designed to meet the needs of those they are teaching. "With the populations we deal with, it's not all about utilizing a specific pose," Penni says. "It's about integrating the whole mind-body experience."

Last summer, Kula for Karma went international when Geri and Penni visited Rwanda as part of a wellness team to teach yoga, breath work, chanting, and meditation to female survivors of genocide. 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 Rwanda's native language of Kinyarwanda on the back. This poem by Patricia Lynn Reilly, a feminist theologian and poet, has become a Kula for Karma mantra. It's about a woman who authors her own life with respect and dignity on her own terms, and it ends with the powerful words: "Imagine yourself as this woman."

The organization's horizon continues to broaden: Two new offshoots are Teen Kula, which addresses the needs of children and teens, and Kula Kare, which focuses on the caregiver. "We've been referred to as the meshuga [Yiddish for "crazy"] yoga ladies," Geri says. "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 tried to make a difference."

## **Kula for Karma Raises Funds for Their Cause**

In November, Kula for Karma hosted its third annual fundraiser at the Indian Trail Club in Franklin Lakes, attracting about 300 guests and raising \$81,000. Special guests included health care advocate Lisa Oz, wife of Dr. Mehmet Oz, and CBS News medical correspondent Jennifer Ashton, a gynecologist based in Englewood. The proceeds will help fund future programs that will serve combat war veterans, children with cancer, and at-risk teens.

For more information, visit [kulaforkarma.org](http://kulaforkarma.org) or call 888.545.9642.