

# Peaceful exercise continues to center many

## by Kassandra Shanette Lockhart

What comes to mind when you hear the word relaxation? Is it a warm, bubble bath? A good book? A crossword puzzle? A massage? Writing? The beach? For many, the thought of relaxation sends a euphoric shockwave through the body. However, it's often followed by reminders that the to-do list is never ending.

Instead of allowing themselves to become overwhelmed by what needs to be done, many turn to a practice that researchers believe started over 5,000 years ago: Yoga. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines the term as a system of physical postures, breathing techniques, and sometimes meditation derived from Yoga but often practiced independently especially in Western cultures to promote physical and emotional well-being.

This desire for self-care is the reason many throughout Davidson County people flock to classes weekly to put life on pause and connect with their inner self.

Whitney Brooks began practicing Yoga nearly 25 years ago. Back then, YouTube was non-existent and classes weren't readily available. Utilizing a vintage paperback instruction book, she learned basic techniques and started her journey of connecting mind with body. In 2003, she began teaching after being encouraged by her own instructor who noted the potential in her.

"At first, I became a teacher because it was fun and I loved the benefits of the practice," said Brooks. "Over time that's evolved into a dedication to helping people along the journey of healthy aging at any and every age. As an instructor, I appreciate how adaptable and creative a yoga practice can be."

Going with the flow is a major component of Yoga. There's a requirement to allow your body to be in a state free of tension. Participants are encouraged to focus on their breathing which is often called the foundation of the practice. By actively paying attention to your inhaling and exhaling, you can cultivate a space to connect with subtle energy within.

Brooke Ashby, a local instructor, noted the positives associated with concentrated breathing.

"I enjoy working on breathing techniques while seated and still, as well as through the postures and movements of the practice," Ashby said. "Breathing exercises have proven to balance the nervous system, lower blood pressure, and relieve stress/anxiety."

Many studies over the years have noted the mental and physical benefits that yoga provides. According to an article published by Harvard Medical School, it can help lower blood pressure, blood sugar and cholesterol. It also increases muscle flexibility and strength, boosts endurance and tunes up your lungs, heart and blood vessels. As we keep looking beyond the mat, Yoga has been known to aid in body positivity, mindful eating and weight control. However, it's not as simple as just showing up and reaping the rewards.

"It's worth noting that yoga has a reputation as a miracle cure-all for whatever ails you, which is simply unrealistic — about any exercise," said Brooks. "When I share about the potential benefits of yoga, I like to point out that we're all individuals with our own bodies, our own minds, our own stories, and our

own experiences that we bring to the practice; those things, separately and collectively, play a role in what we do or don't get out of a yoga practice.”

As times changes, so have the options for the exercise. One form that is gaining steam is Paddleboard Yoga. Brittany Wilson, who started practicing when she was a student at Western Carolina University, became a certified instructor nearly seven years ago through the American Canoe Association. While the thought of trying this on a board that's typically no more than 32 inches wide in the middle of water produces hesitation in most, Wilson assures it's not as difficult as it sounds.

“They're (participants) actually surprised that it's not as hard as it looks,” Wilson said. “I hear that more than I hear ‘This was really tough.’ One of the beautiful things about it is as long as you're not afraid of the lake, it's really refreshing. It's very peaceful.”

This same serenity can also be found in a martial arts practice that offers up similarities to Yoga. Tai Chi, which originated in China, is known for meditation, health benefits and defense training.

Carol Layton, who is the Director of Communications for the North Carolina Baptist Aging Ministry, was first introduced to the practice through her job. In working with an elderly population, Layton is constantly seeking ways to assist those she serves. She began teaching Tai Chi three years ago.

“I'm certified in both Tai Chi for Arthritis and Tai Chi for Fall Prevention,” Layton noted. “You learn the movements, sequences and began to learn how it can help them with their balance. I always tell the class if they're familiar with Yoga then they know it's really expansive. Instead of extending the arm fully, you would keep a slight bend. It's softer, helps a person maintain that center of balance and more control of the body.”

As evidenced, both practices have benefits that extend well beyond what takes place in class. This could be the key reason instructors have seen an increase in participation over the years.

“I think more individuals are looking for an outlet to release stress/anxiety while also participating in an activity that's good for the physical body as well,” said Ashby.

With the new year upon us, now is perfect time to focus on determining your self-care routine, if you don't have one. If you do and haven't tried Yoga, Paddleboard Yoga or Tai Chi, consider incorporating them into your wellness routine. It could be the thing you're missing from the life you want to live.

Brooks teaches classes at the J. Smith Young YMCA. She's also available for one on one sessions. Ashby holds classes at pure Light Yoga in High Point on Monday evenings and Yoga Mindset in Thomasville on Thursdays. Wilson offers Paddleboard Yoga through the Lexington Parks and Recreation Department in the late Spring and Summer. Layton is the process of scheduling another round of classes through Thomasville Parks and Recreation Department.

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