



Mary Lynn Fitton, founder of the Art of Yoga, leads students in a series of poses during their yoga class at the San Mateo County juvenile correctional facility.

The Almanac/Veronica Weber

'Bad girls' doing time learn art of yoga

Rehabilitation program teaches self-calming and accountability

By **SUE DREMANN**

No one touches the gang girls in San Mateo County's Margaret J. Kemp Camp for Girls. No one.

The mere sight of red or blue clothing can set off flurry of gang hand signals.

Yet, as somber-faced girls sitting on the gym floor crouched forward recently, their foreheads resting on the floor, Mary Lynn Fitton, 44, and assistants from the Art of Yoga Project did the unthinkable: approached the girls from behind and massaged their shoulders and backs, hands slowly working down to the base of the spine.

Court-school educator Deborah Budesca watched the interaction with amazement. In 30 years of working with youth, she'd never seen anything like it. These girls would never let anyone touch them, she said. Such trust is not won easily.

But Ms. Fitton and the Art of Yoga instructors are trying to heal the whole girl. Trust is part of that healing.

The program combines yoga and creative arts to help at-risk adolescent girls develop healthy alternatives to violence, self-harm and substance abuse. By developing a relationship with their bodies, they develop accountability, said Ms. Fitton, a Palo Alto resident and the program's founder and executive director.

Fifteen wary young women had earlier filed into the gym. Eye contact was at a minimum. Girls who come are the privileged ones, referred by judges to be rehabilitated for significant substance-abuse, self-destructive behaviors, mental health issues and gang involvement, Ms. Budesca said.

Tall and trim, Ms. Fitton asked them to check in:

"Feeling nervous."

"Tired emotionally."

"Tired. Confused."

"Tired, irritated."

"Good emotionally."

"Confused and lost."

"Emotionally, feel betrayed. Physically, good," they said.

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STANFORD BLOOD CENTER:

Donors urgently needed

STANFORD BLOOD CENTER is sounding the call for donors with type-O and type-A blood to meet current needs and replenish a blood supply that was depleted in January.

The center had to import blood from other centers over the last two months to help meet hospital demands, but at this point, there's a regional shortage, according to blood center spokesperson

Michele Hyndman.

The center has made several appeals to people already on its roster of donors, she said in a news release, but "we need people who have not donated with us before to give blood."

Ms. Hyndman said the need is urgent: "We are no longer able to buy all the blood that we need to serve local patients. It is critical that eligible people

donate blood immediately."

Donors should be in good health with no cold or flu symptoms. They must eat well and drink fluids prior to donating, and must present a photo identification at the time of donating. The process takes about one hour.

Potential donors are encouraged to give at the center's Palo Alto location at 3373 Hillview Ave.

To make an appointment, learn hours of operation and get directions, call 723-7831, or go to bloodcenter.stanford.edu.



Instructor Melissa Graney gently massages a student's head at the end of a yoga session for incarcerated girls.

The Almanac/Veronica Weber

Learning the art of yoga

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She reads aloud a work by Spanish poet Antonio Machado:

*“... Last night as I was sleeping,
I dreamt — marvelous error! —
that I had a beehive
here inside my heart.
And the golden bees
were making white combs
and sweet honey
from my old failures. ...”*

“What does he mean?” Ms. Fitton asked.

“That he accepts his past and looks toward his future,” said Rachel, a small, dark-haired girl who looked to be 17.

“That’s right. You guys have potential for something new. You can make new honey from old failures,” Ms. Fitton said.

“Yoga is a stretch — physically and emotionally.”

Looking inside

Ms. Fitton struck a hand bell, signaling time for practice to begin.

“Ommmm,” the girls chanted, hands pointed skyward. In response to directions, they stretched, forming the cobra position.

A few of the girls took over, calling out positions. Part of the program is about taking ownership — for oneself and of the community, Ms. Fitton said.

“Open your libro,” Rachel called out, grinning. “Stretch your arms, and say hello to the sky. Do a push-up and do a cobra. You can do it ladies!”

“I can tell you this program is one of the most valuable things I’ve seen anyone do with at-risk youth,” Ms. Budesá said. “She can reach them in a way that we really can’t. It’s brought them together. And the art that she’s done with them is not just art. It’s looking inside themselves.”

Ms. Fitton integrates art and writing projects into the program, bringing in guest artists to guide the girls through self-realization and positive self-image exercises. The art supplies are donated by individuals and businesses, such as University Art in Palo Alto, Ms. Fitton said.

The girls have drawn self-portraits, filled with energy. Some portraits express self-loathing, others project what they would like to be. Many incorporate images of women doing yoga.

The young women have also created body maps, outlines of their bodies into which they add pictures and words to describe themselves, and they’ve written positive messages to each other, Ms. Fitton said.

Ashley, 18, and Malia, 15, now look at themselves more favorably, they said. Ashley began yoga practice in October when she was still in juvenile hall.

Tall and athletic with long, ginger-colored hair, she is upbeat, eyes sparkling.

“People say how they are really feeling. At the end (of yoga) they do a closing, expressing how you feel, and you change at the end,” she said.

Malia concurred. Her face is soft, contradicting the tattooed symbols on her wrist that signify her gang affiliation. She used to have difficulty managing anger and talking to people. Yoga and art have helped her to feel more relaxed around people and comfortable with herself, she said.

“When you draw it out,” she said of her self-portrait, “it makes you feel like a beautiful person inside and out.”

“We’re teaching the practice of yoga — stressing balance, breathing, focus and centering — and trying to bring them to accountability to self, others and the community. ... (We’re) bringing in breath work and meditation and making it practical — taking it from the mat out into the world,” Ms. Fitton said.

“When you have a court date, do some breathing techniques. You can do backbends for energy. It’s a natural antidepressant.”

Appealing approach

Ms. Fitton began working with girls and young women while at UCSF. In clinical practice, she saw clients struggle with having regrettable sex, self-loathing and depression, and committing crimes.

At the time, she was also looking inside herself, studying meditation to fill a spiritual void.

Yoga’s precepts for living nonviolently, contentedly and without greed appealed to her as ways of teaching troubled girls referred from the Oregon juvenile justice system or foster care in Ashland. She developed the model for the Art of Yoga Project while there in 1998.

The curriculum came out of her own issues as a teen and 20-something, when she struggled with body image and the need to be impossibly thin and successful, she said. Yoga and journaling — writing her thoughts and feelings — helped get her beyond her own self-loathing.

“I want them to think, ‘How are you stealing from yourselves?’” she said.

Ms. Fitton said she brings the same practice she used with the San Francisco 49ers when working with them at YogaSource in Palo Alto.

“(Yoga) breaks them down and gets rid of some of those pretenses and bravado, which is also found in gangs and also connects with the deepest part of themselves,” she said.

Emotions sometimes spill onto the mats. In the stressful atmosphere of incarceration, someone will invariably have a meltdown in the classroom, Ms. Budesá said.

Then, one of the girls will yell, “Ommmm! Do an ommmm!”

“And they will clench their fists and do it,” she said. ▀

Sue Dremann writes for the Almanac’s sister paper, the Palo Alto Weekly.

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