Using yoga and art to help incarcerated teen girls

Submitted by Mary Lynn Fitchen, founder, the Art of Yoga Project

Have you seen Nike’s campaign called the “Girl Effect”? It aims to improve the lives of adolescent girls in developing countries. “Why girls? Because when we all invest in girls, everyone wins,” the website reads.

At the Art of Yoga Project (AYP), we completely agree. But we believe it’s important to start with girls who are at-risk in our own communities, right here in east Menlo Park, Redwood City, and East Palo Alto. Because girls here need us, too. They need to know they matter to us and that there is hope for them to become productive members of society.

The Art of Yoga Project uses an innovative year-round curriculum combining health education, character development, yoga, mediation, creative expression, and writing to give girls in the San Mateo County juvenile justice system tools to prepare for a positive future.

Simply said, the goal is to reduce recidivism, to keep teen girls out of adult women’s prisons. Each year, AYP serves more than 500 girls in county detention, and last year began mentoring the girls after they are released.

“Most of the girls in the juvenile detention centers have been abused and neglected at home,” says Lisa Pedersen, AYP executive director. “They run away and turn to gangs for a sense of community. On the streets, the girls commit what we call ‘survival crimes,’ like prostitution and selling drugs, to get by. A cycle of victimization continues. A girl’s eventual arrest is an opportunity to stop the pattern and to begin to address her many and complex needs.”

How can yoga and creative expression turn a girl around? Through a disciplined and rigorous regimen, AYP focuses on building self-awareness, self-respect and self-control. Backed by judges and probation, AYP helps girls become accountable to themselves, to others, and to their communities. This changes behavior and it changes lives.

“Serena” studied with AYP four days a week for seven months while incarcerated. Since her release last year, she has been mentored by an AYP teacher. “I’m more aware of what I’m feeling inside,” Serena says. “I want to be a lot more than what I thought I could be. I just have to focus.”

Recently, the Art of Yoga Project was invited to attend the Governor and First Lady’s Conference on Women in Long Beach. AYP was asked to display some of the girls’ artwork as part of a California Arts Council project.

“The girls were thrilled to have their art appreciated by so many inspiring women and leaders,” says Ms. Pedersen. “I think it gave them a stronger sense of self-worth.”

After the event, Maria Shriver told us: “Your work is truly changing lives... I look forward to working with you all to continue to change lives, one woman, one girl at a time.”