

A Gift of Peace

by Sarah Lucas

> **Not surprisingly, the** girls in our local juvenile detention centers are there as a result of circumstances stemming from hideous upbringings—abuse that leads to life of the streets, prostitution for survival, and deadly gang affiliations. As their inner worlds continue to crumble, they build walls around themselves to survive, retaining only the skills needed to survive in a world filled with crime and violence. While numerous scientific reports spout the benefits of yoga to the mind and body, could it really benefit girls so traumatized by life?



Absolutely! Palo Alto resident Mary Lynn Fitton's own journey through yoga and creative writing brought her healing and liberation and inspired her to "take it to the girls that needed it most"—incarcerated teens, the fastest growing population in the justice system.

Founded in 2003, The Art of Yoga Project and its strength-based curriculum has become an integral part of the rehabilitation of girls in San Francisco, San Mateo, and Santa Clara detention centers as a mandatory part of their school day. By using art and yoga through a carefully constructed 18-month curriculum, the highly trained and dedicated instructors are able to work with over 500 girls each week on self-awareness, self-respect, and self-control

giving the girls "space and tools to look inward."

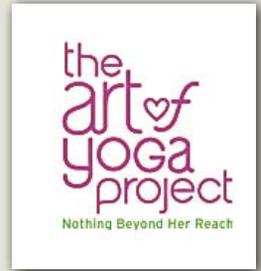
The girls come in the door with misconceptions about the instructors, (they are weak) yoga (that it is for skinny, rich women) and art (that it is a waste of time) but their bravado breaks down very quickly, according to Fitton. They are put through a tough asana practice, followed by journaling or a collaborative art project. By the time two hours has passed, they are calm and more connected to the best part of themselves, grounded by the yoga and breathing, and able to express their emotions through their art.

The program is about respect and developing discipline and "the girls are amazed that we show up each week," says Santa Clara site director Rebecca Bara. "We come to these girls with our hearts open and they feel the love and acceptance," many for the first time in their lives. Realistically, not all the girls will stay alive, but for those who do, "we are planting a seed they will come back to," Fitton proclaims

While each girl currently leaves with a yoga mat and list of free neighborhood yoga classes, future goals include a more formal continuum of care, junior training program certifying the girls to teach yoga in their communities and reproducing the program on a national level. The Art of Yoga Project teaches the girls to make peace with their past, while preparing them to face their future with strength and grace and a new voice all their own.

Sarah Lucas is a wife and mother of four, local philanthropist, event designer and proud member of ChAngels. To see what else the -ChAngels are up to, visit their blog at www.thechangers.blogspot.com

HOW YOU CAN HELP: LaBelle Day Spa will be offering special packages June 23-25, with 10% benefitting the Art of Yoga Project. The Art of Yoga Project regularly holds yoga classes to benefit the project and will be hosting a women's retreat to Santa Cruz in the fall. Check out the website for more information. www.theartofyogaproject.org



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*Space is limited! Please call LaBelle Day Spas & Salons at Town & Country Village, Palo Alto (650) 327-6964, to reserve your spot today with event code M Magazine. Deadline for reservations is June 14.