Better than Zoloft

Yoga Unlocks Creativity in Troubled Teens

With mousse-stiff hair and arching penciled eyebrows, "Sandra," 16, stands tall and serene — which is, quite frankly, amazing. She was 12 when she was first raped, 13 when she became addicted to methamphetamines, and 14 when she had her third pregnancy and first abortion. She's been to jail twice. Then she came to the Lithia Springs Girls Home in Ashland, Oregon, and began doing yoga and art in The Yoga and Creativity Program. Now her body is going through different contortions from those of her past. She arches back in Natarajasana (Dancer's Pose), breathes in Shavasana (Corpses Pose), and joins her classmates in painting a beautiful silk scarf of her very own. Through movement and creative expression, she is exploring her self-awareness, body image, relationships, and resiliency. With 11 other troubled young women, Sandra is using yoga and art to get back into joy, wonder, and love.

Founded in 1999 by Mary Lynn Fitton, R.N., M.S. (yogagirlgallery.com), and Leslie S. Gibbons, M.A., The Yoga and Creativity Program encourages young women to feel at home in their bodies first, and then use this newfound ease to express themselves in creative and artistic endeavors. The program consists of three terms, each comprised of six two-hour classes. The girls (aged 12-19) practice rigorous yoga asanas (poses) during the first hour, transitioning into artistic projects such as beadwork, group sculpture, improvisational theatre, and collective poetry. Discussions on how to live with integrity, health, kindness, and awareness are incorporated into each class session through lessons on the yamas (restraints) and niyamas (observances) described in Patanjali's Yoga Sutras.

The combination of physical discipline, free movement, self-care, creativity, and group communication is producing poignant and effective results. Girls accustomed to communicating with aggression and violence are discovering quiet and peaceful places within themselves. Classes are their reprieve for the week. They are met with inspiring music; they practice in a circle beside a smiling Buddha statue; teachers' strong hands encourage their bodies into age-old postures known for aiding depression, digestion, and menstrual problems. The girls interact with one another to create beautiful art from a grounded inner space. As one student observed after rolling out of a back-bending cakrasana (Wheel Pose), "Don't take Zoloft; do yoga!"

—Devon Ward-Thommes