

BRINGING YOUR PRACTICE TO LIFE



artistic freedom

Struggling
teens find
girl power
through art
and yoga.

Mary Lynn Fitton wants teenage girls to feel the same kind of freedom that she's found in yoga. So she's chosen to teach asana and yoga philosophy to those whose autonomy is curtailed: teens in the juvenile system. In 1998, she started teaching yoga to at-risk girls in East Palo Alto, California, which eventually led her to start the Art of Yoga Project in 2004 at the Lithia Home for Girls, a juvenile justice treatment facility in Ashland, Oregon. She's since developed a yoga and creative-arts curriculum for detainees, which integrates art as a way for girls

PEOPLE

to internalize lessons about yoga and themselves. Last year Fitton moved back to California to partner with the Margaret J. Kemp Camp, a juvenile justice facility in San Mateo. Now eight other facilities around the country are adopting her curriculum.

"Yoga strips away the gangsta style," says Fitton. "We challenge them physically, *then* we talk about their choices and feelings. Art lets us further explore concepts and teach yoga's eight limbs." The girls make

artistic freedom

- a body map, paint self-portraits, create "ad campaigns" for *ahimsa* (nonviolence), *satya* (truthfulness), and *asteya* (nonstealing). As a result of Fitton's work, thousands have been introduced to yoga, and 250 girls have been through the full program. The yogini artists report feeling safer, and staff notice behavioral improvements.

Formerly a triathlete and ER nurse who exercised, she says, "for all the wrong reasons," Fitton's pace hurt her physically and emotionally. "I grew aware of how tragic my self-talk was. Yoga was my way out." Instead of pursuing a PhD in women's health, she took teacher training at White Lotus Foundation in Santa Barbara and started teaching yoga to teens. "Regardless of class, girls struggle with their personal identity," she says. "Counting calories? Gang activity? It's misdirected energy that could be potential service, which leads to true happiness."

Fitton's hope for the future? "I want every girl to leave with a yoga mat and access to local classes." DIANE ANDERSON

For more information, visit theartofyogaproject.org.

real world yoga

challenge

I'm the only yogi in my high-stress workplace. How can I stay connected to my practice while at work?

response

Stay aware of your breath to keep focused in the present, the ultimate yoga practice. Whether you are standing up giving a presentation or sitting at your desk, practice keeping a long, gently curved neutral spine. Practice Uttanasana (Standing Forward Bend) in a deserted conference room to bring yourself back into your body. Use a marker to write on your water bottle "compassion," "breathe," or "let go." Teaching would be another way to get in a little practice time. You could offer to lead a 20-minute class during lunch a couple of times a week. If your workplace is as stressful as you say, it wouldn't be surprising if you had a full class. JUDITH HANSON LASATER

body image makeover

When your inner critic bad-talks your body, quiet it and suggest a more loving message.

After yoga practice, thank your body for its

work. Sit in a simple cross-legged position with your eyes closed and share some gratitude with yourself. Start with your head.

"Thank you, brain, for communicating with the rest of my body. Thank you, nose, for helping me breathe..." and so on.

When you get to parts that you've felt negative about, spend extra time on them. Maybe you've told yourself that you're too small, too big, or too uneven in the breast department. Why not instead be grateful for these formations that make you a woman? Focus on what's behind your chest: Your lungs help you do pranayama, and your heart is a source of love. Appreciate your midsection; internal organs do a lot of work to nourish you. Recognize the effort your thighs make in standing poses. You can't trade bodies in this lifetime. So instead of changing your body, change your thoughts! D. A.

