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Yoga studios proliferate in Whatcom County

Residents appreciate the mental and physical aspects of healthy practice

LAUREN KRAMER - FOR THE BELLINGHAM HERALD

The year was 1978 and Ingela Abbott had just moved to Whatcom County from her native Sweden. Back home she had been practicing yoga for 11 years. After arriving in the Pacific Northwest, she became determined to teach it.



There were no yoga studios in town at that time, but Abbott was undeterred. She approached the university, private health clubs, physical therapy clinics and even the county jail, requesting permission to teach the iyengar yoga she loved. Before long she was teaching 12 classes a week, moving around to various gyms and workout rooms.

Fast-forward 33 years and the county's yoga landscape has changed considerably. A quick Google search yields at least five studios in Bellingham, with many more classes offered at private gyms and workout clubs.

Abbott's studio is one of them. The 60-year-old Bellingham resident eventually tired of lugging her mat from one gym to the next. She dreamed of having her own space where she could foster the growth of a yoga community, offering classes that would appeal to a wide variety of students.

Her dream came true in 1988 when she opened Yoga Northwest, where eight teachers instruct 33 classes a week. Her studio is in Fairhaven, a space with radiant-heat floors and an oriental ambience.

"Through the years, some 7,000 people have moved through my studio, learning to stand up straight, breathe correctly and do the downward dog pose," she says with pride. "We have people from every corner of society taking our classes, from 7-year-olds to 85-year-olds. Some of our classes have up to 30 students."

It's a far cry from her early classes when perhaps five to 10 people would show up. Students come initially hoping for more flexibility, core strength and relaxation, but as they become familiar with the yoga postures, they realize there's more to the practice than that.

"It improves their postural alignment, which helps minimize strain during the day," explains Abbott. "We focus a lot on breathing, which helps give them more energy during the day. And we weave in yoga philosophy, which echoes through the week with its emphasis on honesty, respect and contentment. Our yoga students feel this really enhances their quality of living."

When Abbott's not doing yoga, you'll find her hiking, biking, kayaking, skiing and running. She has completed 22 Ski to Sea races, and just did her first Masters World Cup cross-country skiing in Vernon, B.C. She shows no signs of slowing down.

"I don't live to do yoga, but I do yoga to live," she says. "It gives me the strength and energy to do the fun stuff I love."

A few minutes' drive from Yoga Northwest you'll find 8 Petals Yoga, a cooperative yoga studio in an old downtown Bellingham building with brick walls, hardwood floors and large windows flooding the space with natural light.

"It's a warm, inviting space that feels like a sanctuary," says Susan D'Onofrio, one of nine yoga teachers at 8 Petals.

A New Jersey native, D'Onofrio moved to Whatcom County in 1989, arriving to find only one studio in town. Five years later, she began teaching anusara yoga, a blend of physical and meditative postures, breath awareness and philosophy.

"The number of yoga teachers in the county has definitely increased over the years," she says. "A lot of people have discovered how beneficial yoga is on so many different levels. They've seen and experienced what profound changes yoga can instill in their stress levels, and in life in general. It's something we practitioners feel compelled to share with the world."

In other businesses, the mushrooming number of studios would be worrisome competition. That's not true with yoga, D'Onofrio insists.

"Every style offers something slightly different, and students tend to migrate toward a style with which they feel most comfortable," she explains.

"My classes tend to be smaller in size, so each student gets more individual attention," D'Onofrio says. "The classes are designed so that beginners will feel comfortable, but there is still enough challenge for students who have been practicing for a while."

There are mostly women in her classes, ranging in age from their mid 20s to their late 60s.

"Lately, some women have started bringing their husbands, to expose them to the same experiences they've had in yoga," says D'Onofrio, who says yoga enhances her and her students' lives in multiple ways.

"Yoga contributes to my general health, as I'm almost never sick. It keeps me flexible and centered, strong, reduces my stress, balances my emotions and helps me connect with my inner spirit," she says. "These are all benefits that everyone can experience right away, and many of my students regularly report noticeable changes after just one class."

The good news is that if you've never taken a yoga class and want to try one, Whatcom County has dozens of options today.

For example, 3 Oms Yoga, also downtown, offers power yoga classes, beginner classes, prenatal classes and anusara classes, to name a few.

If you like the idea of breaking a good sweat, try Bellingham Bikram, on Railroad Avenue. In a 90-minute class that takes place 21 times a week, Bikram's yogis move through a series of postures in a room heated to 105 degrees.

You'll leave feeling a bit like a pretzel: toasty hot and stretched to the limits.

Lauren Kramer is a Bellingham freelance writer.

YOGA VOCAB

Anusara: A school of hatha yoga emphasizing universal principles of alignment, heart-opening postures and the spiritual and meditative benefits of hatha yoga.

Iyengar: A form of yoga known for its use of props, such as belts, blocks and blankets, that help yogis reach their postures correctly.

Asanas: Yogic postures.

Namaste: A greeting or salutation that originated in India and is commonly uttered at the end of yoga classes.

WHATCOM YOGA STUDIOS

3 Oms Yoga: 3omsyoga.com; 360-671-3510; 1210 Bay St., Suite 100.

8 Petals Yoga: 8petalsyoga.com; 360-319-1601; 1317 Commercial St., Suite 203.

Beyond Limits Yoga: beyonlimitsyoga.com; 360-676-9642; 1308 Meador Ave.

Yoga Northwest: yoganorthwest.com; 360-647-0712; 1440 10th St.

Bellingham Bikram: bellinghambikram.com 360-671-9642; 1321 Railroad Ave.

Read more: <http://www.bellinghamherald.com/2011/06/16/2062889/om-sweet-om-yoga-studios-proliferate.html#ixzz1PrQmIPCb>