



Teens practice yoga at King County Juvenile Detention Center in Seattle. Photo courtesy/Yoga Behind Bars. Used with permission.

YOGA BEHIND BARS

Creating a Safe & Healthy Community

by Andrea Blair Cirignano

Just the name Yoga Behind Bars (YBB) is intriguing and can create a variety of reactions. Some might not think that prisoners deserve the benefits of recreational activities and some might not think it's safe for yoga instructors to spend time in prisons. Others are immediately touched or inspired by the efforts of founder Shaina Traisman and her group of local instructors.

Traisman, a social justice advocate

and local yoga teacher, started Yoga Behind Bars in 2007 and started to add additional instructors to help expand the program to additional facilities. She had already been teaching at the downtown jail and noticed a need that extended beyond what one instructor could handle.

With so many causes and charitable organizations in the Pacific Northwest, one might wonder, "why prisoners?" There is no debate about the fact

that yoga is calming but the benefits extend far beyond that for these students and the rest of the community.

Executive Director of Yoga Behind Bars, Natalie Smith, RYT, a psychology researcher and the first instructor Traisman added to the roster at YBB, said that the initial impacts of these classes are, of course, "calmer, healthier individuals," but adds, "All of the research shows that, in addition to a laundry list of physical improvements, yoga

improves emotional health, stress response, drug recovery, and may lower recidivism rates," added Smith.

This is important because "People are often shocked to realize that 99 percent of incarcerated people will be back in society at some point," said Smith who asks, "What kind of person do you want in your community?"

For those that question whether the incarcerated population "deserves" yoga, Smith counters with the question, "How can we create a safe, healthy community?"

Smith, Traisman and the rest of the instructors at Yoga Behind Bars are proving that yoga is one way to accomplish this goal. Not only do the students experience a shift but so do the instructors.

Sometimes a yoga practice on the mat is similar to the action of planting a seed and the snowball of benefits off the mat are akin to that plant growing and flourishing. When a student is more connected with his or her body, they often make healthy choices that extend beyond themselves. Many yogis find themselves not only eating healthier after beginning the practice but also making more gentle choices for their mind and overall wellness. The benefits of treating oneself with kindness naturally extend into the local community and eventually make their way into the entire population.

"Yoga is a time-tested practice for becoming a healthier, kinder human being. It addresses the whole person in accessible ways and with powerful tools," said Smith, "Healthy, peaceful people create a healthy, peaceful world."

Writer Andrea Blair Cirignano is a local yoga instructor with a journalism background. She believes yoga is for everyone and that each member of the community could benefit from the practice in some way, shape or form. Her articles highlight the unique pairing of this ancient practice with a modern Pacific Northwest lifestyle. Find out more about Andrea at andreablair.net or contact her at Andrea@AndreaBlair.net.

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