

**CULTURE**

**Healing the damage**

Queer yoga classes promote a well body and mind

BY HELEN SILVIS

**B**ending, twisting, stretching and breathing like you just discovered oxygen. It seems that more and more of us are walking our downward dogs to yoga class these days.

We know the rewards are supposed to include a kick-ass body and inner peace. But yoga isn't a gay and lesbian issue...is it? Nothing much here for queer activists, tranny boys or drag queens.

"Wrong," says Bart Church, a Portland-area yoga teacher who has launched [www.gayyogaportland.com](http://www.gayyogaportland.com) for the city's sexual minorities community. "There is a huge need for classes that attend to the special needs of the queer community."

Church points out that many gay, lesbian, bi and trans people suffer attacks on their sexual identity and body image—simply because they stand, move their bodies or express themselves differently from the mainstream.

"Homophobia has a gigantic effect on our feelings about our bodies," he says. "If you are queer or you might be queer or you just have a different way of presenting your gender, you can be abused horribly just because of who you are. So lots of people carry a fear of being taunted or beaten up that is very real."

Joe Doherty, a longtime social worker who specializes in gay and lesbian relationships, recently opened Revolved Heart Yoga studio

because he believes emotional healing happens faster when people practice yoga.

"Because yoga connects us to our inner selves, it's an amazingly powerful tool to heal the damage caused by homophobia," Doherty says. "And for gay men who feel they have to have the perfect body in order to be sexy, it's a way to nurture and accept the bodies we have."

Some gay and lesbian teachers prefer not to discuss their sexuality—saying that it's irrelevant or that they don't want to be pigeonholed or to alienate straight students. But Doherty and Church are among the handful of Portland yoga teachers who believe it's important to be out and open. They hope more teachers will sign up with the Web site and expand the choice of classes and spaces.

"If someone is living with HIV, they don't necessarily know who out of all these hundreds of yoga teachers has the experience and understanding they need," Church says. "There are incredibly loving and compassionate straight teachers who have gay students and are really good at cre-

ating a safe, affirmative atmosphere, but gay people don't know who these teachers are."

**Y**oga student David Birchmeier says he would never have gone to a class if he hadn't known it would be queer-friendly. "It was important to me, and it made it easy for me to bring two gay friends along. It just makes for a very friendly, comfortable environment where you can be yourself."

Birchmeier used to think yoga was just for fit, beautiful people. At 50, overweight with heart problems and high blood pressure, he didn't qualify. Now after attending Church's restorative classes, designed for people living with chronic illness, he's breathing more easily and feeling much better.

"It's the best thing that ever happened to me," he exclaims. "Aches and pains that I used to have are gone. I'm a very conservative person, and I've always had preconceived ideas about yoga, but this has been wonderful."

Doherty has raised more than a few eyebrows in Portland's yoga circles by also initiating a Tantric form of yoga for gay men—where the first order of business is for

everyone to strip their clothes off.

Nude yoga might be taken for granted in New York, but this is a first for Portland. Doherty says many people mistakenly think the classes are about getting turned on sexually. But while Tantric classes do work with sexual energy, they aim to harness that energy toward spiritual growth.

"Being naked is liberating," he asserts. "We learn to challenge our own body issues—the shame and guilt we are socialized to feel—and reach for a deeper part of ourselves."

Angel Kelly, who has been looking for a women's class that explores Tantric yoga, says it's hard to find queer perspectives in mainstream Tantric books and workshops.

Tantric practitioners seek bliss and enlightenment through sacred sex. Both male and female energy is honored as an aspect of the Divine, but much of the practice has been narrowly heterosexual.

"Teachers do bring assumptions to their classes," Kelly says, "and they can unintentionally be hurtful, make judgments and not be welcoming. So I really think you have to have queer teachers in order for queer people to explore it." □

Contact REVOLVED HEART YOGA STUDIO, 1318 N.E. Broadway, at 503-281-9772. For queer yoga class times and locations, visit [www.gayyogaportland.com](http://www.gayyogaportland.com).

HELEN SILVIS is a Portland free-lance writer.



Joe Doherty will help you discover inner peace—with or without your clothes on

*"I'm a very conservative person, and I've always had preconceived ideas about yoga, but this has been wonderful"*  
—David Birchmeier

OREGON POTTERS ASSOCIATION  
22<sup>nd</sup> ANNUAL SHOW AND SALE  
**CERAMIC SHOWCASE**



WHEEL THROWING COMPETITION  
Between leading Portland mayoral candidates.  
Friday evening 5:30pm

AWARDS CEREMONY & MUSIC  
Friday 6 - 9pm  
No-Host Bar  
Music by Sweet Thunder



April 23, 24 and 25  
Friday & Saturday 10a.m. - 9p.m.  
Sunday 10a.m. - 5p.m.

Oregon Convention Center  
777 NE Martin Luther King Jr. Blvd  
Over 200 participating artists  
[www.ceramicshowcase.com](http://www.ceramicshowcase.com)

FREE ADMISSION  
OPA is a non-profit organization




it's ME!  
wigs



gift certificates available

breast forms, bras & more!  
• Cinchers • Gaffs • Padded Panties  
trans friendly  
susan johnson owner/fitter  
2041 ne burnside, gresham  
503/491-5110 ~ [www.shopitsme.com](http://www.shopitsme.com)


WESTOVER HEIGHTS  
CLINIC

Offering general internal medicine and excelling in sexual health care

Serving the community for 22 years

2330 NW Flanders  
Suite 207  
**503-226-6678**

Casual Dining  
Piano Lounge  
Game Room  
Open 4:00 Daily



Hobbs's

120 NW Third Avenue, Portland OR 97209 • (503) 224 3285 • [www.hobbspdx.com](http://www.hobbspdx.com)  
Parking Validated Smart Park Davis & Front