

Finding peace, inside and out

Yoga instructor draws on her own experiences to help others heal

BY SUE ZALOKAR
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You can't control what life throws at you, but you can control how you react to it."

That was the meditation for my second community yoga class at the Old Town Clinic, a health care clinic run by Central City Concern for people experiencing poverty. Like the affirmations shouted from the pews of a Baptist church during the sermon, everyone in the class grunts or smiles knowingly at that first part: You can't control what life throws at you. "Amen."

The classes have been a success for more than five years. Taught by volunteer instructors from Living Yoga, a Portland-based non-profit, the classes are open to the community, complementing their chronic pain clinic on Friday afternoons.

We are not in a typical yoga class.

Three of us are seated in chairs, one of whom came to class on a motorized assistive chair. Another in our ranks has emphysema and came to his first yoga class the week before.

I myself am recovering from a lower back injury. Many attending the class are in recovery, from drug or alcohol addiction. Still, we are here to honor our bodies and minds through yoga. And, thanks to Living Yoga, their volunteer teachers, Central City Concern and Old Town Clinic, we are doing just that.

Instructors at Old Town Clinic rotate classes, teaching once or twice a month. One of the volunteers, Michelle Barton, started teaching yoga at Old Town Clinic in 2010. The organization is close to her heart. She knows the power of yoga. She used to be a student: Michelle served seven years at the Coffee Creek Correctional Facility where Living Yoga classes were taught.

"It felt like while I was in prison, for that one or two hours, I wasn't in prison," Michelle said.

Shortly after her parole in 2010, Michelle knew that she wanted to pursue a career in the healing arts, specifically yoga.

For many of the students, this class is about facing demons. This is something else that Michelle can relate to. She was involved in an auto accident that killed two people — her passengers — in 1995. Michelle suffered minor injuries and was released from the hospital to learn that a warrant had been issued for her arrest. She went to see an attorney and learned that she was being charged with two cases of manslaughter, each with a 10-year mandatory sentence. If convicted, she would have faced 20 years in prison with no 'good time' and no programs. After weighing her options, Michelle looked at her then 8-year-old son and a map and made a decision. She fled.

She moved across the country, putting as much space between the state of her crime and her family. She created aliases for her son and herself and they lived on the lamb



Practitioners at Old Town Clinic follow instructor Michelle Barton's lead through a yoga session.

PHOTO BY SUE ZALOKAR

for eight years before Michelle's past caught up to her.

She was extradited to Oregon and her charges were dropped from 1st degree manslaughter to 2nd degree manslaughter because the fatal auto accident was not intentional. She was sentenced to two, seven-year terms that ran concurrently.

Michelle says she was grief stricken and broken by the time she began serving her sentence. She had never really had the chance to grieve the loss of her friends and the impact of the decisions she had made. Everything just hit her all at once. She decided she was going to use this time in prison to really heal and that she would take every opportunity that would be beneficial to her while she was serving her sentence.

She completed a computer technical program and she acquired a job at the law library.

She also began to attend Living Yoga classes. Immediately, she felt as though she had connected with something really important. Yoga class is what started the healing process for Michelle.

"It was a long process," she said. "I got in touch with my grief. I became accountable in my own mind for what happened. I just started to heal."

When she was paroled in March 2010, one of the first things she did was to take the teacher training to volunteer for the organization. She says she wanted to give the very same hope and opportunity to other people in the same ways she had experienced in class at Coffee Creek.

"I wanted to give back," said Michelle.

As she began her journey with teaching volunteer yoga classes, she received her 200-hour yoga teacher credential certification and took the classes with Sarahjoy Marsh, the founder of Living Yoga.

During that time, Michelle began to sub for teachers while she was finishing her program. One of those teachers was Kim Carson, who teaches an adaptive, therapeutic yoga class for people with mobility issues, such as older adults and people who are recovering from injuries. Therapeutic yoga focuses on lowering the risk of injuring, or re-injuring, oneself while building flexibility, strength and developing tools to use for reducing stress and anxiety. Michelle says she found that this was the group she really wanted to connect with: people who might not have access to a traditional yoga classes due to mobility issues or healing physical or mental trauma.

Currently, Michelle is working toward her advanced teacher training specializing in therapeutic yoga. The training is expensive and Michelle must fit the course work in between a rigorous teaching schedule. She

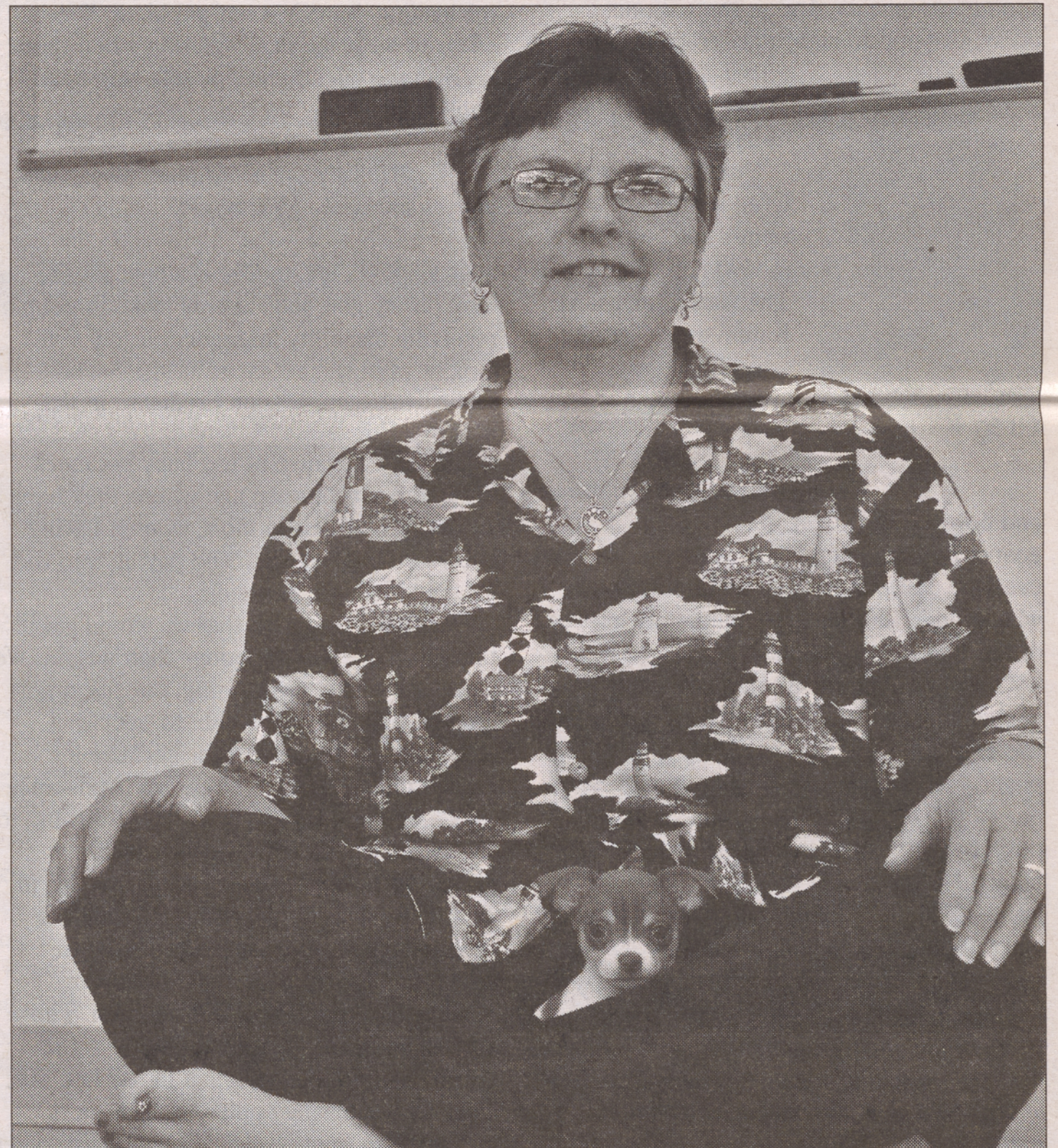


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"We all have issues," says Michelle Barton. "But people who have been homeless or who have experienced the grips of long-term addiction tend to hold that in their bodies."

teaches classes from one side of the city to the other, and continues to volunteer one day a month at the Old Town Clinic.

Students at the Old Town Clinic are very grateful to have the Friday class to attend. For some, it is the only yoga class they have access to.

Sylvia Phelps has been coming to the Living Yoga class at Old Town Clinic since 2008, when the classes first began. She says that the classes help her deal with life. Yoga is a tool that helps her relax and be in the moment. Phelps says that she finds Michelle's story to be inspirational. Phelps served time in Columbia River Correctional Institution in 1995, but yoga classes weren't offered at that time. "She spent time in prison and found yoga there and now she teaches us, that means a lot," Phelps said. Phelps says yoga class, in tandem with other services, has helped her with her recovery. She will mark five years of sobriety next month.

Ron Marshall is another student who has been coming to Living Yoga class for many

years. The first class that I attended at the Old Town Clinic, Marshall was invited to read a poem that he wrote about his healing process to open the class.

He says yoga is very healing for him, "I come to class and I might be really tired, but yoga relaxes you and gives you energy. It makes you more introspective. It makes it so that your days look better when you finish (a class)," he said. This is the only yoga class Marshall attends. He says he depends on these classes and if they weren't offered, he says something would be missing in his life.

Michelle says of the class she teaches at Old Town, "I've had some of the same students now for three years and that's where my heart is."

She loves teaching to this group of students because they are so grateful and responsive and genuine. "They have had experiences in life that have left a physical signature on them. We all have issues, but