



BREATHING INTO THE NEW YEAR

A yoga class at Dallas Yoga and Balance Studio warms up on Thursday by doing various postures. Yoga is a thousands-year-old practice.

NATHAN WOODS/Itemizer-ObsERVER

Stretching across communities, yoga has benefits for old, young and those in between

By Emily Mentzer
The Itemizer-ObsERVER

POLK COUNTY — Yoga is not a religion, but a practice, a sort of meditation.

"I'm not preaching," said Dawn Spires, yoga teacher and owner of Dallas Yoga and Balance Studio. "I'm not going against any religion. Prayer is talking to God; meditation is listening."

Yoga adds a facet to fitness that is difficult to achieve with weights or cardio alone, Spires said.

"I found mental and physical strength," she said.

After trying it once on a business trip, Spires was hooked. Unable to find a nearby yoga studio, she took the classes needed to become certified in hatha yoga, which focuses on proper form in postures and breathing.

A yoga posture or pose can be as easy as standing straight with your feet under your shoulders, hands at your side, breathing deeply.

But it's more than that, as you visualize your spine lengthening and tune into your body, clearing your mind and releasing stress.

When Spires saw how yoga affected her first class of students, she began teaching more groups.

"I jokingly called it 'drive-by yoga,'" Spires said. She loaded up all the mats and other supplies needed for class and took them to various locations in Dallas, from the Catholic Church to Dallas Retirement Village.

That means her students need fewer supplies to get started in yoga — just some comfortable clothing and maybe socks.

"I provide everything any-

one needs," she said. "I use lots of props."

Props are used in yoga to help support yogis in poses. For example, if you are uncomfortable touching your toes, you can use a prop to bridge the gap to the floor. On the other hand, a prop can be used to lengthen a stretch and push someone further, too.

"Hatha yoga, the science of yoga, focuses on proper alignment," Spires said. "I base it on everyone's needs."

She has students as young as 6 and as old as 94. "One of my students in her mid-80s said people commented that she gets up and down like nothing," Spires said. "She's been doing yoga for three years. Even the family says, 'Wow, grandma.' She's not on medication or anything."

Spires, herself, has scoliosis, a curvature of the spine, and so struggled with some yoga postures. Continued practice of yoga has helped. "Pre-yoga, I was at the chiropractor three or four times a month because I couldn't find things to keep me aligned," she said. "I went twice last year. I've been able to stabilize my own skeleton. If something comes up, I know what to do to help."

Improved health is something that the group of yogis have found at the Monmouth Senior Center, too.

Gene Lund, of Monmouth, started doing yoga when she was diagnosed with arthritis. She decided to start an early-morning class at the Monmouth center.

"I, for one, do yoga as a discipline," Lund said. "I do it to concentrate on my breathing and strength."

The class is free and open to people of all ages, Lund said.

The group meets Monday through Friday, and includes men and women ranging in age from 70 to 94.

Elaine LaFond said she has learned a lot about aging and her body through regular yoga practice, but it



A yoga teacher stretches her arms up, preparing to go into a balance posture.

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A yoga student at Dallas Yoga and Balance Studio holds her hands together while in tree pose, a balance posture on one leg. Yoga includes many balance postures.

took some time. The classes are guided by a tape, and stretches are very gentle, designed for those facing chronic pain.

At first, LaFond said she wondered if the stretching was doing any good.

"As I age, my joints started aching," she said. "I started coming every day and, thankfully, the pain went down and it's not there anymore."

Wilbert Peron said he started participating in yoga because of trouble with arthritis, which would get particularly painful sometimes during the winter months.

"Since I do yoga, and do it almost every day, that hasn't happened at all," Peron said. "One of the surprising side effects is, it's improved my lap swimming."

Peron said the balance he has developed doing yoga postures has helped him find better balance in the water.

Darrell Pennington said he drives from Dallas to join the group.

"I came only because my wife passed away," he said. "I had kind of lost my identity. I thought, 'I'll come see what this yoga is.' Now I can't leave. I've been absent,

and I always come back." The deep breathing that accompanies yoga came as a surprise for Marilyn Swearingen.

"I learned to breathe deep, which I had never done before," she said. "It took some practice. I had to really concentrate and think about how I was breathing."

Bev White said finding that deep breath helps in other aspects of fitness, too.

"You actually have more air in your lungs," she said.

Yoga itself is helping keep her active, White said.

"It took me probably six months holding onto a chair," she said about trying to hold the balance posture known as tree, with one foot resting on the inner thigh or knee, and the other foot firmly planted on the ground, arms raised like branches overhead.

"My children all know about my yoga group, keeping active and doing some-

thing about health," White said. "Adult children tend to worry about their elderly parents' health."

Yoga is one of those things you can continue into old age, regardless of physical condition, so long as you do it safely — and, of course, after consulting your doctor.

"I can adjust pretty much anybody in poses," Spires said, adding that she prefers if a first-timer calls her to discuss any health concerns, prior history with yoga and fitness.

"It helps me to place them in which class," she said.

Yoga is not just for the studio, Spires said.

"The gratification to me is, not just coming to me, but learning how they can do these at home," she said. "I feel so blessed to be in such a nice, small community that has embraced yoga."

Practice the art

Many venues in Polk County offer yoga classes:
Dallas Yoga and Balance Studio: 503-999-8016.
Monmouth-Independence YMCA: www.theyonline.org.
Anytime Fitness, Dallas: 503-623-1131.
Monmouth Fitness Club: 503-838-2951.
World's Gym, Dallas: 503-623-4440.



NATHAN WOODS/Itemizer-ObsERVER

Yogis go at their own pace. Above, yoga students at Dallas Yoga and Balance Studio work their way into triangle pose, each going at the level that feels comfortable.



NATHAN WOODS/Itemizer-ObsERVER

The class at Dallas Yoga and Balance Studio begins class in greeting or mountain pose, aligning themselves and mentally preparing for the postures that come next.