



*My eyes are closed as I focus on the sound of my breathing.*

*I let out a long, steady sigh. I feel my lungs fill with hope as I inhale a controlled, even breath. I must remain totally centered on my breathing so that I can ignore the burning sensation that surges through every muscle of my being. I squat, resting all of my weight on my hands, between my feet. I lean forward, my shins balance on my upper arms. My feet lift off the floor until my tippy toes keep me from toppling forward. I hear a gentle voice. The voice invites me to allow my feet to come free from the earth and fly like a graceful crane. I lean a bit more and my toes lift off; I am flying. ¶ Listening to serene music, and breathing deeply. I realize that for the past hour I have focused completely on the task at hand, moving my body through a series of poses that stretch, strengthen, and revitalize me. I have thought of nothing else but the air moving into and out of my lungs. For one hour I was able to shut out work, errands, and family, and listen to my heart, my lungs, and my muscles. I am so completely relaxed I could easily fall asleep. ¶ This is why I do yoga; for this moment, at the end of the hour, that grounds me, and lets me see deep into myself, giving me pause to remember that I am stronger than I give myself credit for.*

STORY: **DEBBIE INGRAM** PHOTOS: **DJAMEL E. RAMOUL**

five things you didn't know about

Yoga instructor, Jen King strikes an Upward Bow or Wheel Pose

## Today, people are turning to yoga more than ever, looking for a way to relieve stress, and the physical symptoms it produces.

Any exercise is great for fighting stress, increasing production of mood lifting hormones, but yoga also teaches breathing, relaxation, and concentration skills that you can use throughout the day. It gives you permission to put everything aside for a little while and focus on your mental and physical well-being. ¶ There are, however, several misconceptions about yoga. Some people believe that it is a practice for people of a certain lifestyle or religion. Others have thought about trying yoga, but hold back, afraid that they will look silly, or will be unable to perform the poses. ¶ The fact is, yoga doesn't have to be hard, and you don't have to be a monk or a granola-loving tree-hugger to enjoy it. Yoga has been practiced for thousands of years, yet continues to be misunderstood. To learn more about yoga, let's look at what it is not.

**Yoga is not a religion.** Many people think that yoga is a religion, or is a practice of the Hindu religion, however, while yoga is rooted in the eastern Indian culture, it predates the Hindu religion by hundreds of years. Yoga does share a commonality with Hinduism, and Buddhism, in the use of meditation to promote introspection and mindfulness, but it is an intellectual, rather than religious, philosophy. Archeologists have discovered evidence of yoga being practiced 5,000 years ago, in cave drawings resembling yoga poses. Some researchers believe yoga began in the Stone Age as a method of healing people in a community, and later turned inward as a means of self-fulfillment.

While religions center on worship of God or a set of external ideals, yoga teaches you to look within yourself to find harmony by joining the mind and body. The word yoga literally means, "to yoke together." Yoga teaches that exercise, breathing, and meditation work together to promote healthfulness and inner harmony. Some schools of yoga, such as Bhakti yoga and Karma yoga integrate yoga practice with

one's personal concept of God. Many Westerners have found that they can practice yoga without conflicting with their religious beliefs.

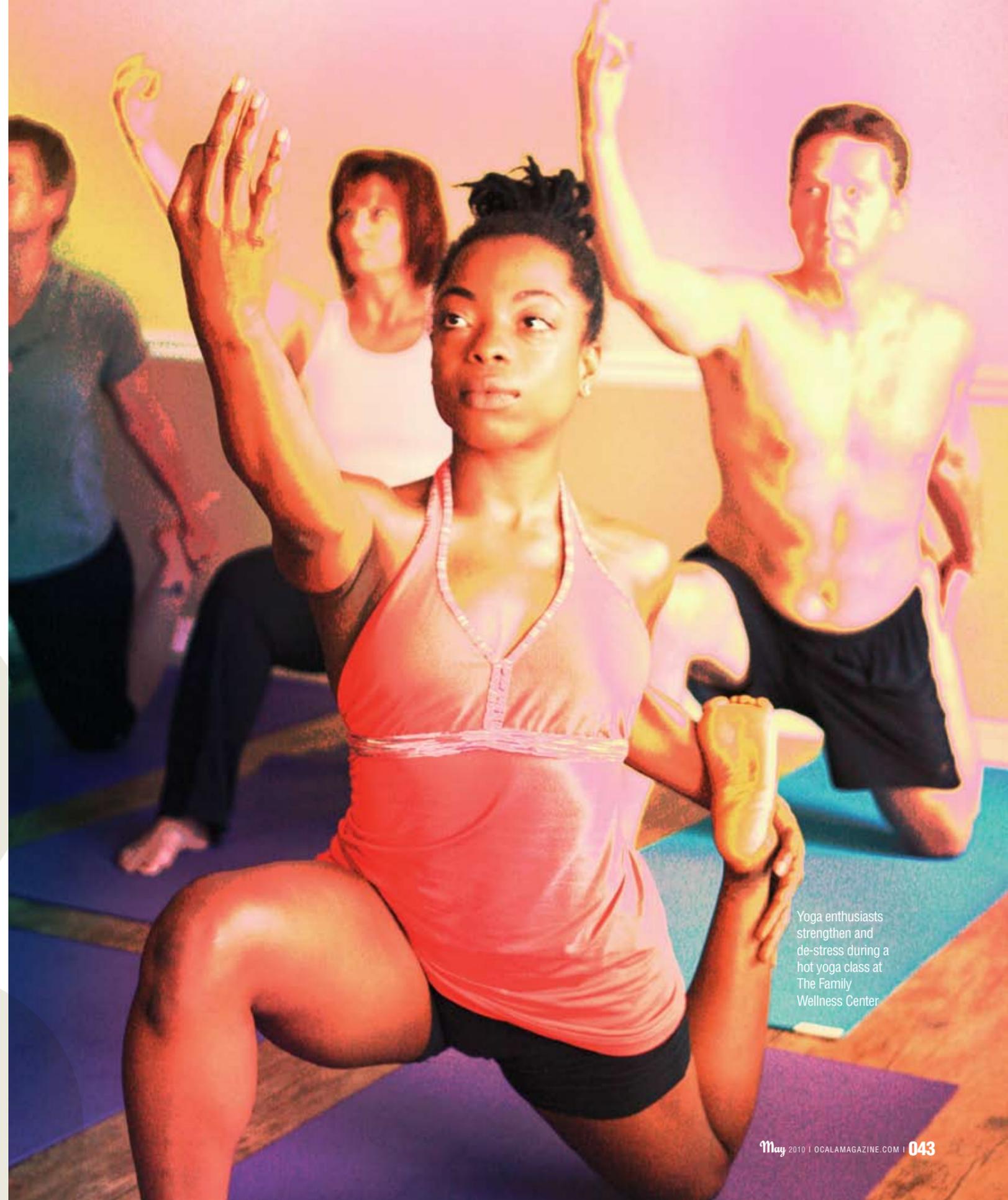
**Yoga is not just for hippies.** Yoga has been practiced in the United States since the 1890's, but really hit the American mainstream in the 1960's, when the hippy culture became interested in anything from the Far East. Today, yoga is practiced in many settings including church recreation rooms, YMCAs, sports training facilities, and business seminars. Seniors citizens who have trouble getting down on the floor can enjoy yoga classes taught sitting in chairs. While many aspects of traditional yoga practices are too intense for children, they can benefit from the stress-reducing breathing techniques and gentle postures. Physicians often recommend yoga for people with afflictions including muscle strains, headaches, back pain, high blood pressure, arthritis, and depression. The American Yoga Association does recommend that pregnant women refrain from practicing yoga poses.

Men fumbling their way through yoga classes full of women has been good material for many a comedy movie scene, but, in reality, many men find yoga beneficial. There are even books and DVD's specifically for men, with modified poses demonstrated by attractive

instructors. Professional and Olympic athletes of both sexes often incorporate yoga into their training protocol for flexibility and core training, as well as to improve concentration skills.

**Yoga is not just stretching.** There are over a hundred schools of yoga, all of which teach the basic principle of linking the mind and body to find self-realization. Some schools focus on teaching the aspects of meditation and breathing. The school of Jnana yoga, considered by many to be the most difficult, seeks to find true wisdom through meditation that teaches one to put aside all thoughts and emotions. Other branches of yoga center on God, and, yet others, on finding consciousness through words or the male/female qualities of all things in the universe. Hatha yoga is the school that teaches the postures we most commonly associate with improving flexibility and core strength. The asanas, or yoga exercises, are intended to stimulate the body's glandular systems and boost the immune system.

Yoga is thought of as a lifestyle. The earliest known book about yoga teachings was written in the second century by the yogi scholar Patanjali. Called the *Yoga Sutras*, it describes eight steps, or 'limbs' of yoga, which devout yoga practitioners should follow for a true yoga lifestyle. The eight limbs are yama (restraint), niyama (observance), asana (exercise), pranayama (breathing), pratyahara (sensory control), dharana



Yoga enthusiasts strengthen and de-stress during a hot yoga class at The Family Wellness Center

(concentration), dhyana (meditation), and Samadhi (clarity or self-realization). Yoga classes generally focus on the third, fourth, and fifth steps: exercise, breathing, and sensory control.

**Yoga is not easy to teach.** For thousands of years, yoga has been practiced one-on-one, passed down from teacher to student. Only relatively recently has yoga been taught in a class setting. Because of the traditional methods of yoga, and its large structure of schools, no national standardized certification exists for yoga instructors. There are many organizations that offer training and their own certifications. Most true yoga gurus believe a yoga instructor should be in continuous interaction with his or her instructor, as it is viewed as a lifestyle and a journey of learning. When seeking a qualified instructor, look for someone who continues to train with a mentor, and ask how many hours of experience he or she has accumulated. The Yoga Alliance (www.yogaalliance.org) maintains a registry of instructors who have achieved at least 200 hours of training.

Hatha yoga classes, the best choice for beginners, involve the most gentle poses and slowest pace. From there, move on to Vinyasa classes, which are more vigorous and use synchronized breathing technique. Ashtanga yoga moves in a fast-pace through a series of poses performed in the same order each time. This style is referred to as yoga flow. Power yoga follows the flowing style of Ashtanga yoga, but does not adhere to the series of poses. Iyengar yoga classes use props, such as straps and blocks, to aid in achieving proper body alignment. Bikram, or Hot, yoga is currently a very popular class practiced in a temperature of 95 to 100 degrees to loosen tight muscles and promote profuse sweating.

**Yoga is not to be feared!** Jen King, an instructor registered with the Yoga Alliance, says, "The biggest fears are, 'I'll look stupid,' or 'I can't twist my body like a pretzel.'" She says fear and doubt are peoples' biggest downfall. "People are afraid of the unknown." Jen says, "Begin your journey from where you are, and progress from there." Yoga student Liza Caudillo says not knowing her instructor was her biggest fear when she first entered a yoga class. "I was nervous," she says, but the instructor "was very kind and made it easy for me to relax and concentrate on the poses... and not my surroundings." Liza now looks forward, every day, to what she calls, "My yoga time."

Instructor Gail LeBlanc says the best aspect to yoga is that anyone can practice it. "Young and old, heavy and thin, short or tall," she says, "yoga knows no cultural boundaries."

Gail shows each student modifications, so that every pose is attainable. Gail says that due to the commonly mistaken notions about yoga, people often enter classes in a state of uncertainty, "An experienced teacher will recognize the new student, and address these misconceptions."

Gail knows firsthand how yoga can change lives. As a two-time breast cancer survivor, she relied on her

yogic breathing to help her through surgeries, chemotherapy, and radiation, as well as the periods of time when she was unable to do any physical activity.

"As I grow daily in my yoga practice, I am grateful for the strength and peace of mind I have found," she says. The students who have known her during her trials have been encouraged, "The general consensus is, 'if you can do yoga, with your health situation, I can do yoga!'"

### looking for yoga?

Marion County Family YMCA  
3200 SE 17th Street  
352.368.9622

Power Yoga by Jen King  
The Family Wellness Center  
4817 NE 2nd Loop  
352.624.2337

Brick City Bicycles  
20 W. Silver Springs Boulevard  
352.369.9400

Women's Fitness & Weight Loss Center  
2509 NE 3rd Street  
352.629.2224

SOURCE: AMERICAN YOGA ASSOCIATION.ORG



The Crane Pose, shown here by Jen King, is part of the arm balance pose series.