

Community Spotlight:



Lara Azzarito Ward & Lotus Gardens Yoga School

Though most people have heard of yoga's multiple benefits, and many are curious about this practice, those who have never tried it are often hesitant to take a class. They may believe it is too easy and not enough of a workout, or too difficult and they wouldn't be able to stretch a certain way or hold poses (asanas). Lara Azzarito Ward's response? "Those new to yoga don't always understand how physically vast it is. It can be the hardest workout you've ever done or the most gently restorative practice. For example if you lift weights three to five times a week you may prefer a strong Vinyasa (flowing) class. However, if you have back problems and haven't worked out in years, beginning with a class focused on alignment to ensure proper positioning of your spine may be a better fit. Finding the right class/teacher is key." She adds, "No one is too young or old to begin yoga... You simply need to find the right yoga for where you are."

Lara is founder and director of Lotus Gardens Yoga School, which creates nurturing, educational experiences for students and teachers. Yoga, Sanskrit for "union," is an approach to health, connecting with self and universe, and integrating body, mind, and spirit. It can ease pain and instill calm amidst life's challenges. As Lara describes it, "For centuries, yogis have explained that yoga is stopping the noise of the mind. Through moving meditations, breathing techniques, and stillness we bring strength and flexibility to the body while calming the nervous system, which has profound effects on the entire body."

Lara advises anyone beginning yoga to find an instructor with a minimum of 200 training hours who teaches a style that seems right for you. Researching types, such as Hatha, "Hot," Kundalini, Ashtanga, and Iyengar, can help. Examples of class focus include strength and alignment, meditation/relaxation, cardiovascular health, and/or healing from surgery, injury or illness. Lara suggests contacting potential teachers and inquiring about: their yoga style offerings; how physical class is; amount of time spent on relaxation and breathing; and, the most simple/difficult poses in each course.

A non-traditional yoga studio, Lotus Gardens' office is in Sherman, but programs are held at yoga studios, corporations, hospitals, schools, and private clients' throughout Connecticut and New York. Their signature certification program is the 200-hour teacher training. They also offer pre-natal, corporate, senior, and 500-hour advanced certifications. Careers of their 200 alumni vary. Some teach one class while raising families and/or working full-time in another field. Others integrate yoga into psychotherapy, massage, or Naturopathic practices. Many become personal trainers, pilates teachers, or full-time yoga instructors.

Lara indicated there is no licensing/official certification requirement for Connecticut, though a national nonprofit registry, The Yoga Alliance, was created in 1999 to initiate and uphold standards for teachers and schools. Lotus Gardens was the first Yoga Alliance registered school in the state.

Interested in teaching? Lara recommends research to find the right training for you. "Truly understand what you wish to teach and share with others, and then learn from that school/style." Lotus Gardens' trainings beginning in March include: Growing Lotus Kids, helping instructors, (grand)parents/caregivers teach body awareness, self-control, focus, and coordination in a fun, nurturing environment; and, 200-hour, including anatomy, asanas, breathing techniques, special needs, meditation, terminology, and yoga history/philosophy.

Her own fitness journey began when she taught classes "during the days of high-impact aerobics, spandex and pink sneakers." Following a post-college car accident, she began gentle movement

and breathing exercises to relieve chronic discomfort. Friends suggested these resembled yoga, a term new to her, which inspired formal yoga study. Lara became a full-time instructor "accidentally," when, while studying for a masters in secondary education, she taught yoga at various businesses, health agencies, and privately. Increasing requests for her teaching led to training some long-term students, and Lotus Gardens Yoga School was born. Dr. Jackie Flynn offered her site,

Balanced Body Chiropractic in Naugatuck, for the initial classes, and thus began a sort of "fellow-hood of the traveling yoga."

Lara's influences include Marika Kraftsow, David Swenson, and Rodney Yee. She describes her yoga evolution in terms of each decade's focus: in her 20s, the physical aspects; during the 30's, therapeutics and healing; and, in her 40's, a quieter, deeper practice. Lotus Gardens proposes yoga practice as a lifelong commitment to learning and sharing health and serenity, a path Lara will no doubt continue to forge when she enters her next decade.

Contact Lara, 500-hour level instructor, at: 860.354.6241, laraward@lotusgardensyoga.com, or www.lotusgardensyoga.com. See ad page 38.