



Marlene DeSanto

Yoga Pioneer

Total Health Center Yoga

by Nancy Cohen

"I'm not going to stop taking yoga — I want to look like you when I'm 78."

"If it weren't for you I wouldn't have known what I wanted to do in life."

"Marlene is a legend..." ~ Yoga students of Marlene DeSanto

Marlene DeSanto attributes her initial 1960's venture into yoga to being a joiner. She began taking yoga with friends at a center in New Haven "loaded with cats, various herbal aromas, and bearded swamis in robes." Initially experiencing some trepidation in this new environment, she continued attending classes regularly, feeling "there was something special about getting into the body this way," and wanting more from the experience. Then, while taking yoga in West Haven,

her teacher, Debbie Kahan, asked Marlene to cover a class for her...thus began her teaching career. Despite her original self-description, Marlene seems more of a pioneer who, in following her passion, helped forge a path enabling the hundreds of contemporary yoga teachers, studios and classes throughout Connecticut.

She opened her first studio in Madison at the urging of friends who indicated no yoga classes existed in that area. Because yoga was not a known entity, initial community response was skeptical and mistrusting. Some tried

closing the business until one active citizen attended class and immediately sensed the inherent health wisdom in the practice. She shared her experience, stifling the "naysaying" and ultimately increasing attendance. While in Madison, Marlene also introduced yoga at Mercy Center. She then rented Guilford studio space for 25 years before opening at Village Walk, her current location (10+ years). Her original studios and car license were titled Om Yoga Center. One day a passing trucker beeped and exhibited a yoga mudra (hand position) with both

hands. "Not wanting to cause any accidents" (and since yoga is about the complete person), she renamed the Village Walk studio "Total Health Center/Yoga."

When Marlene discovered yoga, it was one-size-fits-all. Participants did the same pose, regardless of ability, including headstands in class one. No one said "if you have pain don't do..." whereas teachers now obtain health profiles before class, learning where to focus or what to avoid. Mats were slippery. Sticky ones hadn't been created. Teachers taught in leotards. There were no tools, blocks or straps - just the body, floor and walls. Marlene used a record player. Then cassettes. Now, CD's. In the 70's Hatha was the only type taught. Despite today's numerous yoga styles, she still practices Hatha, integrating functional teachings from other methods.

While teaching, Marlene cared for her four children, husband and home. She asserts yoga has helped her sustain health, energy, mental clarity, and handle multiple responsibilities. It is important, she suggests, for teachers to not only know anatomy, but practice what they preach. "Yoga should be a way of life for teachers who keep learning so they can continue sharing with others." Marlene eats healthfully, exercises and does yoga daily. She says she has maintained consistent weight, height, blood pressure, excellent blood work, and has never missed a class due to illness. Now almost 78, she slows down only by choice.

Yoga is a slow, thoughtful system of relaxing, breathing, stretching and balancing, with poses for every part of the body. It can help soothe, ease stress, increase mindfulness and fitness, stimulate circulation/digestion, and is a potent natural medicine with a preventive holistic approach for all ages. "Nothing compares with the benefits of yoga, which aims to bring good health and tranquility. It is essential to harmonize body/mind no matter what your physical condition, age, abilities or disabilities. Yoga uses what you have and recognizes the wonder of you as you are." It is not religious, though Marlene suggests

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Marlene and daughter Tara

yoga affects spirituality, making us better people. "You become more compassionate, taking care of self to help others."

Marlene aims to create an environment of comfort and sharing. She teaches techniques for daily use, convinced the practice works in how life's lived, not solely on the mat. Her countless stories of yoga's benefits include: mastectomy patients' increased arm range-of-motion; scheduled surgeries able to be cancelled; diminished depression/anxiety; and, increased quality of life as physical/emotional pain ebbed and strengthening occurred.

In considering teaching, Marlene suggests patience is key. "We want a quick fix but yoga is a way of life. It's everything you do - the way you think, move, eat - and can bring you through lots of trials and tribulations." Why teach? She feels that certain people are put here to share and teaching is a

wonderful way to extend knowledge of avenues toward well-being. Many of her students are now teachers.

Marlene believes "everything that happens in life is a learning experience." Yoga has helped her: overcome cancer; avoid knee surgery; work through the deaths of her parents and daughter, Tara; and, face another daughter's involvement with drugs. Through it all, she knew it was vital to allow and express her feelings. A woman with a positive, energetic approach to life, she also felt it essential to keep moving to avoid illness. In an uplifting turn of events, her daughter is now working to help others through drug rehabilitation, with plans to utilize yoga in that healing.

Since Tara's death, Marlene feels that as much as she's into healing she'll always have a broken heart. Believing "experience opens us and often helps deepen our capacity for empathy and understanding," in her inimitable forward-moving approach, she now shares her ongoing process and helps others through a new group for mothers who have lost children. Some died long ago. For others, grief is new. The flagship meeting was arranged and hosted by Linda Scarpace, with meetings now held at Total Health Center/Yoga. Attendees can participate in whatever way feels comfortable. Though mostly discussion, Marlene hopes to incorporate breathing, relaxation, and yoga techniques. Meeting dates are determined at each gathering (walk-ins welcome).

Marlene continues her life-long learning through lectures/workshops, reading, and meeting practitioners of diverse modalities. Her trailblazing for future generations continues, as evidenced when her six year-old granddaughter (who loves yoga) recently said "when I come to Connecticut, Grandma, I want to be your assistant."

Total Health Center/Yoga, 1221 Village Walk, Guilford, CT. One of today's anomalies, Marlene is reachable by phone (203.453.5360), but not computer. See ongoing calendar for class information.