

YOGA

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YOGA

IN POOR COMMUNITIES

ANTHONY FRANCAVILLA

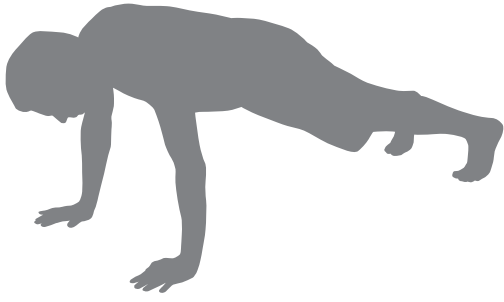


The city of Washington loves its yoga. Back in May, an email and letter writing campaign by thousands squashed a tax hike on yoga classes proposed by the city council to address budget shortfalls. But you won't find any of those concerned residents, many from upscale neighborhoods across the city, at the Monday afternoon yoga classes at Life Pieces To Masterpieces (LPTM) in Ward 7. The building's Spartan concrete exterior doesn't exactly scream yoga studio, but what really sets this lesson apart are the dozen, eight-to-thirteen-year-old boys inside arranged on mats around the instructor. These young men are apprentices at LPTM, an arts-based youth development organization for African American boys and young men living in Washington's most underserved communities. LPTM strives to provide opportunities for its apprentices to discover and activate their innate creative abilities to change life's challenges into possibilities. As part of this mission, the apprentices are exposed to a diverse array of customs and practices from around the world meant to shape them into global citizens. "We hope that with yoga they are getting an opportunity to put into physical practice some of the human development principles that we teach them every day" said - Aikta Suri, LPTM's Director of Education. "With yoga they have the opportunity to learn discipline and leadership by turning inward and focusing on themselves rather than exterior influences."

Without positive male role models in place in these communities, young men develop their own rigid, juvenile definition of manhood. Needless to say, the practice of yoga is not a part of this street definition, but a major part of LPTM's teaching model is an emphasis on developing "positive deviance" or positive attitudes and characteristics contrary to those accepted and expected by their peers.

Of course, exposing these kids to something and having them embrace it are two very different challenges, especially given the special circumstances of the environment they live in. All of LPTM's apprentices come from DC Wards 7 and 8 - predominantly African American (98%) communities plagued by a myriad of social, physical and mental health problems including gang activity, HIV and AIDS, teen pregnancy, violence and incarceration. Almost 40% of the people in these communities live in poverty and 22% are unemployed. All of these problems are compounded by an even more concerning statistic: 68% of households are headed by single mothers. The result is a young male generation forced to grow up too early in order to take care

of younger siblings and struggling mothers. These young men must seek sources of income very early in their lives in order to provide for these families, and as a result many are drawn into the illicit economy of the streets and most miss out on some of the most important stages of their development. Only around 30% of African American males in Washington ever graduate from high school. Without positive male role models in place in these communities, young men develop their own rigid, juvenile definition of manhood. Needless to say, the practice of yoga is not a part of this street definition, but a major part of LPTM's



teaching model is an emphasis on developing “positive deviance” or positive attitudes and characteristics contrary to those accepted and expected by their peers. These dozen boys are very likely the only children and possibly even the only people in the neighbourhood practicing yoga and meditation. This is not to say that there isn’t the occasional joke when asked to do a sun salutation. They are, after all, still children, and if no one in a room full of kids giggles moving from upward facing dog to downward facing dog there must be something wrong. Their teacher, Daniel Hickman, isn’t concerned. “You can’t forget that they are kids,” Hickman said. “How do you introduce yoga to a new population? It’s not just that they are kids or even that they are kids from poor communities, sometimes it’s hard enough just that they are males. I try to orient our lessons towards developing their powers. Strength, agility and performance are things that resonate for males.”

While talk of spirituality and finding an inner-self might be met by giggles from most elementary age children, LPTM is an oasis of spirituality and self-awareness in a tough community - for nearly 15 years, meditation has been part of the daily programming and the boys are used to it. However, the apprentices noticeably perk up when Hickman tells how increased strength and flexibility can benefit their performance on the football field or the basketball court. When told that some of their favorite players in the National Football League routinely practice yoga, the boys are dumbfounded. This sports-orientation is just part of an overall strategy aimed at keeping the boys engaged throughout the session. Hickman is also conscious of the need to move a little faster in order to keep his audience’s attention, and he even emphasizes specific poses for his most unique pupils.

“It’s all about the warrior,” he said. “The warrior pose is an excellent place to tune their energy otherwise they turn into street warriors.”

Hickman, who has been teaching yoga for over a decade and is the founder of Silk Road Yoga, is no stranger to introducing the practice to unique populations. In addition to his time at LPTM, he volunteers at Walter Reed Army Medical Centre where he works with amputees. Hickman was placed at LPTM by another DC non-profit called YoKid...Stretch Your Limits. YoKid’s mission is to enable students to foster self-awareness through regular instruction in yoga and meditation by qualified teachers. Co-founder Michelle Mitchell believes that the self-awareness gained through the practice of yoga can help kids realize their full potential academically, socially and emotionally.

“YoKid’s vision is that all children can have access to this ancient practice, particularly students from under-served communities who couldn’t normally afford to have a yoga teacher come to them,” said Mitchell.

It might be the sports references that keep the kids coming back, but even if they don’t know it, in the process they are starting to gain something a little closer to both Life Pieces’ and YoKid’s missions. At the end of the session the boys practice silent meditation—a Herculean feat for a group that age. It goes quite well despite a few murmurs and curious glances at the sound of the Tibetan singing bowl. Afterwards, Hickman engages the group in a discussion on the purpose and benefits of meditation. The last comment comes from eight-year-old Michael, who up until that point had not said a word. “You feel like you are floatin’” he said.



The response garnered a few laughs from the other boys, but Hickman loved it. And why not? This seems to be the greatest potential benefit of yoga and meditation for underserved youth: a chance to float in an everyday life full of experiences that keep them painfully grounded. With this skill these young men can escape inside themselves and consider their own innate potential free of the obstacles and distractions of exterior realities. "The human development system that we teach here is a personal process," Suri explained. "My current stage of development might look different from yours, but we are all going through the process. It's an inward journey, so they have practice looking inward to be aware of where they are in that process."

For more information visit lifepieces.org and yokid.org