

OM town HEROES

In places without hospitals or high schools, without movie theaters or a McDonald's, the dedicated gather—often in offbeat venues—to practice. Meet the American yogis who are bringing yoga home.

By Andrea Ferretti

WHO (from left) CeCe Prince, Araya, Jamie Axelrod, Deb Phenicie, Marcia Suniga; (not shown) Andrea Malmberg, Jagoe Reid

OMTOWN Lander, Wyoming **POPULATION** 6,551

Cowboy Community

IN THE MIDDLE OF WYOMING at the foot of the Wind River Mountains is a small but diverse town, which, residents say, is getting groovier by the day. Lander was once dependent on ranching and mining, but it is now the international headquarters for the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS), which means there's a steady stream of young outdoorsy types and a growing interest in complementary healing, spirituality, and New Age thinking. "It's probably more integrated than any other western town in Wyoming. You can go into Lander Bar and see a granola climber with long dreadlocks playing pool with a rancher in a hat, and they're both throwing cowboy jokes around," says local yoga teacher Araya (who uses no last name).

Jagoe Reid dreamed of upping the grooviness quotient with a yoga studio, but six months after its opening she found the rent too high and the turnout too low. Not to be deterred, Reid joined together with Araya and eventually created a co-op of seven teachers whose styles range from Ashtanga to Anusara to Iyengar Yoga.

For two years, the Limber Body, Limber Mind studio survived because the teachers donated their time and satisfied themselves with the rewards of connecting to their students. Now the studio is almost profitable. "Small towns take longer to warm up to new ideas," Reid says. "But those who've made a commitment to build our *sangha* [community] are steadfast."

PHOTO: NICOLE MORGENTHAU



I ♥ the Heartland

WHO Kathy Chinouth

OMTOWN Lena, Illinois

POPULATION 2,622

O Pioneers!

Responding to a call for submissions on the *Yoga Journal* website, more than 150 yoga teachers wrote in and told us that, yes, yoga really *is* everywhere. You flooded our inbox with passionate stories about thriving yoga scenes from Skagway, Alaska, and Fargo, North Dakota, to Frankenmuth, Michigan, and Sautee Nacoochee, Georgia.

You showed us how, teacher by teacher, yoga is making its way into America's nooks and crannies—into farming villages, resort towns, through subfreezing weather, and onto dazzling beaches—and improving the quality of life for people who never thought they'd be doing the Down Dog. Most of you are pioneers; you've overcome immense challenges to offer classes, many of you volunteer your teaching time, week in and week out, and you are almost all women. (A few male yogis wrote in with stories of great enthusiasm and inspiration, too, but most were students, not teachers.) What really rocked our world was to learn that all the teachers we interviewed know each and every student by name—heck, they usually even know whose daughter scored the winning point at the basketball game last week.

For more stories about Omtown Heroes, see page 146 as well as yogajournal.com/extra.

LENA, ILLINOIS, IS THE SORT OF PLACE where you leave the car running when you slip into the post office, and where the grocery store will take an IOU. But there's not much in the way of entertainment; the old farm town has neither a movie theater nor a rec center. As a result, the gym is a popular hangout—so Kathy Chinouth turned it into a yoga hot spot.

"Most people thought it was all about putting their leg behind their head," she says, recalling the response when she posted a sign offering yoga (free to gym members, \$2 for nonmembers). "I just told them to come to class and see." Six or seven people did.

Over time Chinouth, who studied with a teacher in a nearby town, has drawn devotees—including local farmers—she never expected. Modestly, she chalks it up to word of mouth; no one wants to be left out, she says. But it's clear that Chinouth, 56, knows her community well and has made people comfortable with the unfamiliar. She dims the lights to help with self-consciousness; she has first-timers come early to learn the breathing; and perhaps most importantly, she urges students to try three classes before deciding what they think.

Plus, she's a great role model. One farmer, who admitted he almost laughed out loud during his first class, later noticed that his arm was quivering in Side Plank Pose as Chinouth, nearly 20 years his senior, demonstrated the pose with ease—while talking. He was sold.

Now her hatha class is consistently filled, and her students brim with enthusiasm. Not long ago, in fact, after she confessed she wasn't altogether happy teaching at the gym, her students called landlords and real estate agents in a quest to find her a better space. "I was hoping there would be interest," she says, "but never in my dreams did I think there would be this much interest."



PHOTO: MATTHEW GILSON



Gotta Have Faith

WHO Betty Wooten with Wendy Wilson

OMTOWN Georgetown, Kentucky

POPULATION 19,158

THE SENIOR MINISTER of the First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) in Georgetown, Kentucky, believes gays should have the right to marry, so he proudly displays a bumper sticker that reads, "Another person of faith voting against the marriage amendment." That is no surprise to church member Betty Wooten, who says, "We always were a bunch of rebels." But she was surprised—and scared—when the Reverend Wendy Wilson, an associate minister, asked her to teach yoga classes to members of the congregation. "My first reaction was, there's no way I can do this," Wooten says.

She was selling herself short. Although Wooten had discovered yoga just five years earlier, at the age of 56, it had

had a dramatic effect on her life. After the death of her husband, she and her daughter, Vickie, went on a spa vacation to ease their grief. While there, the two stumbled into their first yoga class and have been smitten ever since. "Yoga did for us what it's supposed to do," she says. "I tell people that it saved my sanity and they think I'm exaggerating, but I'm not."

Vickie pursued a teacher training certificate, but Betty never considered teaching until she was asked to. After ample prodding by her daughter, Betty decided to face her self-doubt. Equipped with her husband's old neckties for straps and limited wall space (they have to take down a large cross to do inversions), Betty began to teach—and found her calling as a yoga teacher. Now a loyal group meets at the church every Wednesday morning to chant Om, do pranayama, and practice flow yoga. Wooten is pleased with the class size—nine students. "If it gets any bigger, we'll have to start ripping pews out of the sanctuary," she quips.

WHO Cindy Senarighi, Robin Norsted
OMTOWN White Bear Lake, Minnesota
POPULATION 24,453

Onward Christian Yoginis

CINDY SENARIGHI REMEMBERS FEELING wary about going to her first yoga class because the church she'd been attending warned against any practice that stilled the mind, thereby allowing "evil" to enter it. After trying a class, though, she realized that she had experienced a new kind of stillness, and instead of feeling further from God, she felt closer. Her friend Robin Norsted felt the same.

"We decided to explore an alternative format for people who wanted to experience the benefits of yoga but who were concerned that it would clash with their Christian faith," says Senarighi, who is currently a seminary student. So they started a company called Yogadevotion and began teaching in churches with the goal of building healthy congregations. To that end, they give a portion of their proceeds to the health ministries of each church that offers the classes.

The style is hatha flow, with generous helpings of Christian spirituality added. At the beginning of class, rather than chanting Om, students are encouraged to silently invoke a favorite phrase from a hymn or scripture, or a Christian mantra such as "Yahweh," the Hebrew name for God. In class, Yogadevotion students might imagine grabbing the hand of God for support during an intense Warrior Pose or resting in God's presence during Child's Pose. A typical class ends with "Peace be with you," rather than "Namaste."

Now seven years old, Yogadevotion has built a healthy following and employs 10 teachers in 20 churches in the Twin Cities and surrounding suburbs. Senarighi is delighted but not surprised. "Most people don't have a problem incorporating their faith into the practice," she says. "They learn that what's at your center is what you'll relate to in the practice. For Christians, that center is Christ."



PHOTO: VANCE DOVENBARGER



When Things Fall Apart

WHO Melissa Derbyshire
OMTOWN Port Clyde, Maine
POPULATION About 150

SINCE MELISSA DERBYSHIRE MOVED TO PORT CLYDE eight years ago, she's devoted herself to creating a stalwart yoga community in nearby Tenants Harbor. She finds that yoga helps people cope with the frigid weather and keeps them from going stir-crazy as winter's chill drags into May. It also forges bonds; her students often sail and socialize together.

But she didn't realize how caring her community could be until March 2003, when her son, 25-year-old Marine Brian Kennedy, became one of the first Americans to lose his life in the Iraq war. Soon after, her students gathered at her home, brought food, and held a small ceremony to honor Kennedy, planting a tree in his memory.

With 31 years of practice under her belt, Derbyshire finds herself leaning more on her yoga. "The practice gives you that inner strength," she says. "Even when you're falling apart, you discover you still have strength deep down." And now more than ever she is conscious of motivating her students and herself to keep finding the value of yoga. "This has shown people what yoga can do, because it really does help in a crisis," she says. "It gives me a chance to lead by example."



Cold Mats, Warm Hearts

WHO Diane Ziegner

OMTOWN Talkeetna, Alaska

POPULATION 860

SEVEN YEARS AGO, DIANE ZIEGNER, 43, went to a class at the local primary school and found a small group diligently following the instructions of Iyengar Yoga teacher Patricia Walden on a much-used video. "They were so enthusiastic," she recalls, "but most of them had never had a hands-on adjustment. I thought to myself, These people need a teacher."

"These people" are residents of the remote village of Talkeetna, where there are killer views of Mount McKinley, but you have to drive 60 miles for major grocery shopping. The physically active community of fishermen, dogsledders, skiers, and climbers supports a local radio station, a community theater, a float plane service to carry people into really remote spots, and now a yoga studio in a yurt.

Ziegner regularly commuted two hours each way for a teacher training program with Iyengar Yoga teacher Lynne Minton. Then in 1999 she began teaching at schools and churches, and by 2003 found a permanent home in the yurt she's named Studio Z. Her corps of students, ranging from 16 to 60 years old, is close-knit, even though they don't all get to class regularly. "If it's 20 below here or the fish are running, people aren't going to come," she says. "But I know they love it. They always come back."

PHOTO: MICHAEL DYOUNG



Sunshine State Salutations

IT'S A DREAM VACATION—morning yoga on a white-sand beach, your gaze drifting toward distant islands floating on the pale turquoise water. When class begins, the sun is shining, but as you lie in Savasana, a breeze picks up and warm droplets of rain dot your body, leaving you calm and refreshed. For Sugarloaf Key locals this trip requires no splurging or travel—they just head to nearby Sugarloaf Lodge beach, where they can join guests of the lodge and Mary-Alice Herbert, a self-described late-life yogini and certified Integral Integrative Yoga therapist, who teaches twice a week.

The rapid and at times extreme weather changes inspire Herbert, 64, to teach on the beach, even though she has her own studio, called Sugarloaf Key Yoga, or SKY. The weather nudges students to remember that just like nature, their yoga practice, emotions, and lives are always in flux. “There are days when it’s hot and sticky and you don’t want to practice. And then a breeze comes and everything changes,” says Herbert, who grew up on the island.

With a handful of regular students in their 80s, a group of teacher trainees, and children who sometimes come to the beach class, Herbert often has to adapt her lessons on the fly. Her solution is simple: “I teach the postures according to my students’ ability. I have an enormous repertoire of modifications.”

Herbert hopes to teach at a prison and is encouraging one of her teacher trainees to teach yoga to hospice caregivers. “At 64, it’s good to feel like I’ve really got my shoulder to the edge of the world,” she says, “and I’m helping to shift it the other way.”

WHO Mary-Alice Herbert

OMTOWN Sugarloaf Key, Florida

POPULATION Less than 1,000



WHO Desiree Kleemann

OMTOWN Point Roberts, Washington

POPULATION 1,308

Yogis Without Borders

IF YOU'RE HEADING TO THE MADRONA YOGA studio from anyplace else in Washington state, have your passport handy—you'll have to cross the border twice to get there. Point Roberts, with a population that swells from 1,300 year round to 3,500 during tourist season, is a five-square-mile peninsula that hangs off the coast of British Columbia. Call it an oversight or a governmental snafu—the land is just south of the 49th parallel, so when borders were drawn in 1846, it became U.S. territory.

The quirks of cross-cultural living include trips to Canada to go to the movies or shop for shoes, and crossing two borders to hit U.S. soil for school or work. In town, everyone accepts both forms of currency, and Desiree Kleemann, 44, teaches her own version of vinyasa flow to a mix of Americans and Canadians. "I have so many students who come from Canada that the Border Patrol is starting to recognize them," Kleemann says. "They'll say, 'Going to yoga? Have a good time' and wave them through."

Like the town itself, Kleemann's studio on her wooded property is a refuge from the stresses of modern living. "When you're in Savasana in Vancouver, you hear traffic and smell exhaust," she says. "Here the most irritating thing might be hearing a dog bark. It's almost like being on retreat."

Having lived in Vancouver, Kleemann, a former professional dancer whose own influences include Shiva Rea, Sarah Powers, and Judith Hanson Lasater, enjoys bringing in teachers from the city (45 minutes by car) for workshops. But she doesn't regret her decision to teach small classes in a small town; she cherishes the relationships she's developed with her students. "Small studios are doing important work," she says. "We're just as important as those with 400 people going through every week."



PHOTO: ANDY REYNOLDS

Fungh-ky Yoga

WHO Alison Donley (standing)

OMTOWN West Grove, Pennsylvania

POPULATION 2,652

AFTER 12 YEARS AS A NOMADIC YOGA TEACHER—driving to and from rec centers, gyms, and colleges to teach—Alison Donley opened a studio in her southeastern Pennsylvania town of West Grove. At a meeting to obtain her zoning license, Donley found herself fielding questions about plans for a massage room—was it all really just a cover for an X-rated massage parlor?

Then she had to deal with an unappealing local phenomenon: manure. “Basically, it stinks—often,” she says with a laugh. West Grove is the mushroom capital of the United States, and the conditions that create great ‘shrooms can make for some foul-smelling days. “There’s nothing like asking people to breathe deeply when it smells like chicken poop.”

Nixing her children’s suggestion to name her studio Yoga Fungha-mentals, Donley invested in an aromatherapy diffuser, peppermint and lavender oils, and a sense of humor about malodorous moments. Less than a year after opening its doors, the small, mainly Ashtanga studio—called the Light Within, based on a quote from Swami Rama—is thriving. Donley and her colleague, Carol Murray, a student of New York-based Beryl Bender Birch, teach 12 classes per week and plan to offer Mysore classes soon.

Donley, 44, says she has “lived yoga” for about 10 years now and attributes her devoted following to her own love of both the practice and her students. “I might not be the most gifted teacher in the world, but I love these people,” she says. “I want them to see how incredibly amazing they are. And the mat’s a great place to start.”

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