

MARLENE MAWHINNEY

A National Treasure

By Erin Moraghan

MILLIONS OF CANADIANS ARE INSPIRED through their yoga practice, and these days classes can be found just about any place, from the local gym to the church basement to the office boardroom. Ever wonder who helped plant the seeds of yoga asana in our communities? Meet a yoga pioneer: Marlene Mawhinney. She's one of Canada's most senior yoga teachers and an inspiration and guiding light for many around the globe. She's devoted much of her life to sharing the magic of yoga with thousands, changing lives for over 40 years.

Marlene, President and Senior Teacher at Yoga Centre Toronto, has been studying with BKS Iyengar since 1985 and teaches the Iyengar method in the not-for-profit studio. "Our work is based on the teaching of BKS Iyengar and we stick strictly to that method. We teach classes at every level, along with teacher training."

Marlene's practical, no-nonsense approach to teaching asana resonates with students, making the practice accessible and comprehensive. This commitment to accessibility is likely one of the main reasons that countless students with musculoskeletal, systemic, and chronic conditions find transformation and healing within the walls of the uptown Toronto studio.

"We offer a balance of specially designed therapeutic classes for people with a variety of issues and conditions, from brain injury to pulmonary conditions, arthritis and spine issues," Marlene shares. "A large number of our students in our specially designated classes are on bursaries. Often times their illnesses may not allow them to work and afford yoga." Yoga Centre Toronto holds an annual fundraiser to help provide funding for these special needs programs.

"When I first met Marlene Mawhinney I was in such pain from rheumatoid arthritis that moving, bending, or walking at all was difficult. Getting down on the floor was impossible," says Jennifer Mason, who was diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis in her early 20s. An artist

and musician, Jennifer was terrified to experience rapid deterioration of her joints, particularly in her hands which are such vital tools for her creative expression. Believing intuitively that yoga would help her, Jennifer searched for years for a teacher who could accommodate her needs. "I found what I was looking for in Marlene - a compassionate and generous expert with decades of experience adapting yoga for people with health challenges. For the first two years with her I did all my yoga sitting in a chair, and as my health gradually improved, Marlene designed new practices to support my medical treatment, including recovery

from several [reconstructive] surgeries. Eventually I was able to join a regular yoga class. Marlene's knowledge and kindness have made such a difference in my life that I will always be grateful. I think she is a national treasure."

Stories like Jennifer's might seem miraculous, but these transformations are a big part of Marlene's teaching and the overall approach at Yoga Centre Toronto, whether students have special needs or not. What's more, doctors - once huge sceptics of yoga's healing potential - are sitting

up and paying attention. "I see a huge shift in the medical community," Marlene explains. "I get many referrals from physicians, chiropractors and physiotherapists." Marlene has collaborated on a published study examining the effects of Iyengar yoga on cardiac patients, and is currently involved in a new study on patients with pulmonary hypertension.

When asked why she thinks doctors are finally embracing the potential of yoga, Marlene answers simply, "Yoga is effective. I see what we do as part of a healing regime for people with cancer, cardiac issues, arthritis, and many other conditions. It's part of the picture." **JE**



For more about Marlene Mawhinney visit yogacentretoronto.ca