



JODY GOEZ-VILLEGAS PHOTOS : FOR THE CHRONICLE

SUNGREETERS: Sarah Paige, left, Colin Banhagel and others find Yoga 4 Kids classes in Kingwood fun and relaxing.

Younger set moves to yoga

Kingwood classes geared to teach children how to relax, unstress

By JODY GOEZ-VILLEGAS
CHRONICLE CORRESPONDENT

AMONG the flora and fauna of Kingwood's livable forest, there exists a special variety of weeping willow. There also are different sorts of birds and dogs and other furry friends. On good days, you can even see eagles.

These elements of nature were brought here by yoga instructor Marita Gardner-Anopol, herself a transplant from the Northeast.

The weeping willow, the butterfly, the dog, the camel and the eagle are poses used in the yoga classes that Gardner-Anopol conducts for kids.

"You play yoga, and that's how you plant the seed in a fun way," said Gardner-Anopol, 50. "In yoga, we think our body is a tree rooted into the earth and at the same time reaching toward the sky."

Creator of the Yoga 4 Kids program, Gardner-Anopol opened the Yoga Studio of Kingwood. She says her highest priority is bringing the benefits of yoga to



INSTRUCTOR: Marita Gardner-Anopol was among the first yoga instructors nationwide to see the benefits of teaching to children.

youngsters.

Through her program, Gardner-Anopol said she has been able to help kids with all

YOGA 4 KIDS

■ Created in 1995, the program has been in Kingwood since 2002.

■ Yoga classes available for children age 4 to 12; Adult classes available also.

■ The Yoga Studio of Kingwood is located in The Cheer Place at 1683 Northpark Drive.

For more information, call 281-441-9642 or visit the Web site www.yoga4kids.us

manner of distracting or debilitating conditions such as scoliosis, anger, insomnia, asthma, attention deficit disorder and Tourettes Syndrome. Anecdotal evidence of her success includes testimonials from children who have participated in her classes and from resources in print and online, including write-ups in Time magazine and various regional publications.

"Kids will say that yoga helps them do better in school," she noted, quoting statistics from a 1997 study done in Bangalore, India, at the Vivekananda Kendra Yoga Research Foundation. In one study, 108 children were separated into

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four groups. Among the group trained in the proper yoga breathing techniques there was an average 84 percent increase in spatial memory scores after 10 days.

Gardner-Anapol began her training in New Jersey, where as a child she excelled in running and swimming.

Her love of sports and fitness led her to open a women's health club in 1973. Then, in 1977, she said, a chiropractor herniated the lower disk in her back, bringing her world to a halt.

Gardner-Anapol's doctors told her she'd never walk again without surgery. The doctors, however, hadn't counted on their patient's provident meeting with Manya Kahn, a prominent Manhattan yoga instructor.

"She healed me through yoga," Gardner-Anapol stated simply. "I sold my health club and I ended up going to work for her."

Within a year, Gardner-Anapol was certified to teach yoga. Soon after, she was back in New Jersey studying and working with Kim Pealta, a yoga instructor at the senior Iyengar level.

Attention to detail

The techniques used in the Iyengar style of yoga—attention to detail and precise alignment of poses—appealed to Gardner-Anapol and she quickly adopted the style for her own classes.

Gardner-Anapol's life, meanwhile, had grown to include a husband and a young daughter.

It was her daughter, Alix, then in first grade at a Montessori school who inadvertently planted the seed for Gardner-Anapol's idea to introduce yoga to children.

When her daughter asked Gardner-Anapol to help out at her school one day, the yoga instructor said that instead of reading a book to the children or helping with games, she would show them some yoga moves.

"This is how Yoga 4 Kids was born," Gardner-Anapol said. "I did it as a gift, to give the kids yoga . . . I was elated to see the kids smiling."

Gardner-Anapol's tenure in the Northeast was cut short when her husband died in 2001. Because he had had roots in Texas, she came with her daughter to spend some time with his family and ended up staying.

Within months, she was introducing Texas youngsters to yoga.

Success stories

In 2002, Gardner-Anapol opened the Yoga Studio of Kingwood. So far, she counts several success stories among her students, adults as well as children.

"I'm 45, but three years ago, I was feeling old and achy and stiff," said Ellen Bitner, one of Gardner-Anapol's Kingwood fans. "I started going once a week, then twice a week, then three times a week."

"Is it addicting? Yes!" Bitner said. "But in a positive way."

"I'm no longer breathless taking the laundry upstairs, not achy . . . yoga changed all that."

Bitner was so taken with the program and its results, she took her two sons to the yoga classes as well. Her older son needed to replace a gym class, while her younger son needed to stretch his muscles and increase his flexibility for hockey.

"(Gardner-Anapol) is very nurturing and very positive," Bitner said.

Members of the Goedjen family agree. Each of their four kids has benefited from the techniques they have learned through yoga, mom Karin Goedjen said. One child found help in dealing with fears and coping skills, another learned posture and breathing techniques that helped with asthma, a third discovered how to go from feeling ill and throwing up every morning to feeling good about going to school and the fourth child has just plain enjoyed it.

"I am a bit skeptical at heart,

and watching this transformation amazed me," Goedjen wrote in a letter to Gardner-Anapol.

Gardner-Anapol herself continues to be amazed at how well some of her students have done with the yoga.

Amazed by results

"One 10-year-old came in and for the first few sessions she was bouncing off the wall like a pinball machine," said Gardner-Anapol. "I would just keep telling her, 'Don't lose your roots.'"

Those roots have served both Gardner-Anapol and her students well.

"I'm hyperactive. The yoga has calmed me down. It's brought balance to my life, it's improved my posture (I have scoliosis), it's improved my focus," she said.

"As for my students, they're learning practice makes perfect and discipline and life skills," she said. "They have a sense of themselves, they're confident, they're not nervous, they know who they're, they like themselves."

Gardner-Anapol's zeal for spreading the word about yoga has led her to come up with several creative ideas, including an idea pitched to and accepted by publisher Simon and Schuster for a book about using Yoga 4 Kids to help kids with A.D.D. The book would include illustrations by her daughter, Alix, now 15 and a sophomore at Kingwood High School.

Perhaps, though, what she's proudest of is an upcoming project she's working on with the Humble Independent School District. After all, her stated goal is to plant the seed, that children integrate the benefits of this 5,000-year-old practice into their day lives and increase self-esteem as well as physical ability.

"Yoga means union in Sanskrit," Gardner-Anapol explained. "Maybe the beauty of yoga is that by joining self-confidence with calm focus, one could soar like an eagle."

Then, only the sky would be the limit.