

Big Idea

Altruistic Yogi

Sue Jones

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Yoga saved Sue Jones’s life. A few years ago, her visits to the mat kept her from losing a fight with depression—and from that place came the idea that yoga could save underprivileged women, too. In early 2006, Jones, now 42, founded YogaHope (yogahope.org), a Boston-based nonprofit that establishes yoga programs in women’s homeless shelters and domestic abuse safe houses. In just two years, she has introduced yoga to facilities in Massachusetts and Washington, with plans to expand into New York, California, and Pennsylvania. In the process, she’s helped thousands of women find empowerment and hope.

What was your reason for bringing yoga to underprivileged women?

After taking a teacher-training program in Hawaii, it dawned on me that there are women all over this world in as desperate a place as I was in. And if you don’t have the means, yoga’s a cost-prohibitive activity. At our facilities, all of the women are in transition. Giving them yoga is a way of helping them through it.

How does YogaHope achieve that?

We’re helping women gain coping skills. This is about getting them to step onto the mat and feel safe. In yoga, you learn that you’re not able to control other people or events—but you can get better at controlling how you perceive what’s happening. At that point, you can pull yourself out of the role of victim and feel empowered.

Have you seen any success stories?

One woman at a substance-abuse program had physical limitations, but came to every class. One day she was kicked out of the center. Six months later, she showed up at a class at another center. She told me that she’d continued to do yoga on her own—and that she wouldn’t be back in treatment if it weren’t for the strength it had given her. She’ll be one of the first to receive a scholarship to attend a teacher-training program.

Do you find it challenging to teach women under these circumstances?

A lot of women are resistant. Maybe they don’t understand the practice or don’t feel comfortable. That’s when I say, “Your resistance stems from a fear, even one left over from something that happened to you a while ago. So ask yourself, ‘What are you afraid of right now?’” Then they relax onto their mats, and you can tell they get it: At this moment, they have no reason to be afraid.