



Road to Joy Through Yoga



Susan Carter

The road that led local yoga instructor Susan Carter to Fort Myers Beach began in Illinois.

"I was a high school teacher in Illinois, teaching Speech, Drama and Debate, and my musician boyfriend got a job playing in Aspen (Colorado) at a ski resort. I went to visit him over Christmas vacation, and then went back home. But by the end of that school year, I packed up and moved to Aspen." It was the heady 1970's. John Denver, The Eagles, Jimmy Buffett, Steve Martin, Goldie Hawn – many '70's icons spent a lot of time there. "It was wild."

Carter walked away from her teaching career at that point. "I was in Aspen Valley Hospital, where I worked on the ambulance in the mountains as an EMT, and I worked in the ER as a unit coordinator for 20 years."

After her marriage ended ("Musicians do what musicians do", she says dryly), her roommate introduced her to his cousin, visiting from St. Martin. And that's how Susan met her man of 33 years, Russ Carter.

"The mother of one of the doctors I worked with in Aspen had a house on Captiva and he would always say 'You've got to come to the West Coast of Florida'. So finally one day, we flew to Miami, rented a car, drove across Alligator Alley, and we stayed at Lovers Key Resort, then drove up and down every street on this island. We were blown away."

The Carters returned to Aspen, gathered their belongings, and never looked back. "After messing up both my knees, mostly from skiing mishaps, I'd had surgery on both my knees, we were tired of winter, it was time." Together, they moved to the Beach in 1990, and have been happily ensconced in a little piece of Estero Island history on Pearl Street since then.

"I started working for Lee Memorial the day HealthPark opened – December 4th, 1991. I'm still there. I'm the Unit Coordinator in the Emergency Room. I've been doing that for 20 years."

Many women find themselves engaged in a very negative inner dialogue regarding their overall appearance and health by the time the big FIVE-OH comes around. Carter was no exception.

"The only thing I knew about my body was that it was too short, too fat, getting too old - everything was wrong with it. I never really thought of my body as a vehicle for my life, other than to judge it and find fault with it." She realized that she needed to find a form of exercise or physical activity that she could do for the rest of her life. "I had worked out like crazy to

get ready for my two back-to-back knee surgeries. What would happen, I'd be on the machine with music in my headphones, CNN on TV and a book. I found it so boring. The whole goal was to get my mind as far away from my body as it could possibly be while I was exercising."

Not long after moving here, the News-Press ran an article in their Lifestyles section about yoga. "I was going to join a gym, but after reading about it, I thought yoga sounded more interesting. So I went to Health and Harmony Center (on Kelly Road and Old McGregor) and signed up for the Beginners' course. By the third class, I knew – 'this is it'."

Carter says yoga is a 'work-in' rather than a 'workout'. "I did go to it originally as a workout, but I quickly realized a profound difference (between yoga practice and the workouts Susan had undertaken at the gym). I read this great book, "Bringing Yoga to Life – The Everyday Practice of Enlightened Living" by Donna Farhi. In it she states that yoga will not make your life easier, but yoga will make your life easier with your life. That is how it has been for me."

Susan assures us that virtually anyone can do yoga, including those who start out with very little strength, energy or flexibility.

"I've worked with people who have had cancer, that have had strokes, paraplegics – the mind is the focus. The poses matter, but not as much as focusing your mind and body together." A few years ago, Susan underwent bunion surgery, and couldn't stand for a while. "I did a lot of seated poses for a month and half. It's not about being in perfect shape to do it. In fact, people who are stiff, who are not in great shape, recovering... they find the biggest difference a lot faster. They can really benefit, because yoga focuses on the entire body. You can adjust the yoga poses to fit the student, rather than adjusting the student to fit the yoga."

Carter credits Kandy Love at Health and Harmony for guiding her along on her journey from yoga student to yoga instructor, beginning 13 years ago. "I became an avid student of Kandy's, and then I went to study with her teacher in Miami – Bobbi Goldin. I was going to classes several times a week."

About a year into her practice, Susan was approached by one of the instructors at Health and Harmony – June Dennison - to put together a yoga class for one of the condo associations on the Beach. She drew up a 'lesson plan' for the classes and showed it to Love, who gave her stamp of approval. A week later, Love suffered a freak accident, breaking both elbows and a knee. "So for the next several months, I taught all of Kandy's classes and I discovered I liked it."

Every March, Kandy and Susan celebrate the beginning of Carter's teaching career on the anniversary day of Kandy's mishap, turning what could have been a miserable memory into a cause for celebration. This approach to life – turning lemons into lemonade, so to speak – seems to be a very real benefit yogis claim can be gotten

through regular yoga practice. So, while the physical manifestation of practicing yoga for the past 13 years draws no complaints from Carter - "I'm in the best shape, at age 62, that I've ever been in my life" - it is the sense of well-being, and the spiritual enhancement, that brings added fulfillment.

Dentist Susan Park, a student of Carter's, would agree. "I started yoga about three years ago because one of my patients recommended it. I found it to be amazing." But six months later, Park suffered an accident and was unable to return to yoga until about two months ago. "When I started back, Susan was so receptive and so warm – and in a short span of time, going only once a week, I have come so far. And there's a whole spiritual side to yoga which is also a very interesting part of it. I think yoga has the potential to change your life. I never thought I'd ever get this well. I honestly wish I had known, understood and done yoga beginning in my childhood. It's such a wonderful thing."

Dr. Timothy McCall, a board-certified internist, Medical Editor of Yoga Journal, a magazine Susan says is chock-full of great information, and the author of the book, "Yoga as Medicine: The Yogic Prescription for Health and Healing" resolved to get up every day for one straight year and do yoga, and he writes about how he could not believe the change that had taken place in that time. He also noted that the mental and psychological benefits were even more profound. He makes the point that anybody can benefit from yoga. Carter illustrates the veracity of that statement. "I've done yoga with someone in a wheelchair; I've done yoga with someone lying in a bed. You can do yoga without having to do a back bend or a handstand."

Carter says opening your body with yoga is like opening a beautiful gift. "It really helps you develop discernment about your body, because your body is always talking to you. Most of the time you don't listen until it gets sick. But the more you do yoga, the more you listen to your body and it starts communicating to you in a whole new way. Most people take a pill to try and mask whatever is hurting or bothering them. But with yoga, you might take action sooner, maybe change your diet, maybe go get a massage, maybe go see the chiropractor. It can all work together to help you become more aware. 'Cause guess what? This is what you've got for this life. This is the body you've got. It is the most important relationship you will have with anything. So you start to become grateful for this body and appreciate this body. If you hate it, it's not going to change. What we resist, persists. Acceptance is the first thing. And then you begin to do these poses... I will never forget the first time I ever did a handstand. The power I felt. It was so exhilarating. I was blown away. And still, every time I do it, I love it."

Susan teaches four classes on the Island each week, on Mondays (6 PM), Wednesdays (7:30 AM) and Saturdays (8:30 AM) at Diamondhead, and on Tuesday



Practicing yoga at the Newton Park

evenings (5:45 PM) at Newton Park. "I'm teaching it because I feel like yoga is a gift – a beautiful gift that has been given to us. And I really believe that yoga should be available to people where they live and where they work." Carter says she has been riding her bike past the Newton property for twenty years, and often envisioned having a yoga class in Jim and Ellie's house. "Theresa (Schober, Mound House and Newton Park director) has been so supportive; she's the one that made this happen (referring to the Tuesday evening class held at Newton Park). I wanted to do this on the beach. This is my home. I want my neighbors to have access to this gift."

Carter believes yoga has changed her life in ways she had not even thought possible, in ways she had never even considered. "The true goal of yoga is not about the poses. It's about the body becoming a tool of awareness. As we begin bringing the mind to the body and activating the body, quieting the mind, we actually begin to see our true nature, which is bliss and joy. We were not put here to suffer. We were put here for joy. Hostile people live in a hostile world; joyful people live in a joyful world. The more you can take conscious responsibility not only for your life, but for the way you experience it, the more joyful you will be. To me, life is either enjoyment or lessons. Pretty much, that's how it goes – you either get enjoyment, or you get a lesson. If you get caught up in the lessons, you're going to suffer a lot."

Susan Carter wants all of her neighbors and friends to experience the joy that can be derived from regular yoga practice.

"It changed my life. I know in my heart, as I live and breathe, that when I am 80 years old my life will be much different than it would have ever been had I not found yoga. I know that in my soul. Don't get me wrong; the physical part is fun! It's fun to be able to do a handstand at age 62, which I do every day. I couldn't do that when I was 22. I wasn't a gymnast, I wasn't an athlete; I was a reader. So for me, at this age in my life, as a woman, to feel empowered in my body, and to watch it age, and to welcome that - to welcome it because I know what waits is wonderful to me – that's the gift of yoga."

Jo List

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