

THE PEACE OF GIVING

THIS RED BANK YOGA STUDIO DONATES CLASSES TO NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS AS WELL AS INDIVIDUAL PEOPLE IN NEED

BY JESSICA JONES-GORMAN

PHOTOS BY CHRIS LOUPOS

When Mary Ansell started practicing yoga more than 20 years ago, she came to the mat with a physical goal in mind: To tone up muscles and maybe even shed a few pounds in the process. But, after just a few sessions, the Shrewsbury resident found that mental and emotional benefits actually outweighed the physical—that she was hooked on the near-euphoria and extreme relaxation that this ancient spiritual range of disciplines provided.

Ansell, a former junior high teacher and now a certified yoga instructor, combines love of teaching with her affection for the at least 5,000-year-old practice by volunteering at local schools and various nonprofits and offering free yoga classes at fundraisers, retreats, and workshops. She taught weekly classes at 180 Turning Lives Around SafeHouse and Monmouth Medical's Cancer Center, and after toying with the idea of opening her own nonprofit for years, launched Open Heart Yoga Studio in Red Bank this past May.

"Our mission is to enrich and unite our community by providing greater access to yoga and mindfulness while creating a more diverse and inclusive environment in which to practice,"

noted Ansell. "With each single, weekly, monthly, or yearly yoga package purchased by our students, the same amount is given to a volunteer or recipient of a local charity or nonprofit organization."

The 501(c)(3) organization has 10 community partners: 180 Turning Lives Around Inc.; Beauty Foundation for Cancer Care; Bloom Again Foundation; Count Basie Center for the Arts; the JBJ Soul Foundation; Lunch Break; Parker Family Health Center; Stephy's Place; Tigger House Foundation; and VNA Health Group. Open Heart Yoga students simply choose which partner they would like to donate their classes to. Since May 5 of last year, 2,272 such donations have been made.

"I have gotten so much out of yoga, I wanted everyone to have the same opportunity to benefit, enrich, and heal themselves," Ansell said. "I'm hoping this community studio eventually becomes a 50/50 operation—with half Open Heart members and half donation recipients. That has always been my intention."

Five corporate sponsors have also signed on to support Ansell's cause: Newport Capital; Denholtz Properties; West Side Lofts; Ansell Grimm & Aaron; and Care To Give all are



currently assisting—purchasing yoga classes for their employees while donating the same services to those in need. Ansell hopes to increase this corporate sponsorship to 10 participants by the end of the year.

“We’ve been getting lot of great feedback,” she said. “People love the idea of giving back when purchasing classes for themselves. Yoga just makes you feel good, so having the added benefit amplifies the open-heartedness. Plus, donations are fully tax deductible, and yoga packages are 50 percent tax deductible.”

Ansell added that the classes at Open Heart Yoga are inspiring in multiple ways.

“Our amazing teachers and programs can truly help bring you inner strength and joy,” she said. **■**



Open Heart Yoga

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