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A Yoga Home

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Through the door of the small room, the social worker and the yoga instructor could hear the characteristic sound of the homeless shelter — the sometimes-loud, always present sounds of 100 women, children and families living in close quarters.

But inside the space where University of Dayton social work professor Jennifer Davis-Berman and yoga instructor Jean Farkas were teaching a yoga class to homeless women, it was quiet and peaceful.

"It's the one hour of the week where they can get away from the noise and the close quarters," said Davis-Berman. "There we are in the yoga room, meditating."

Since September 2011, Davis-Berman and Farkas have unrolled their mats once a week at the St. Vincent de Paul Gateway Shelter for Women and Families on Apple Street in Dayton.

The class grew out of Davis-Berman's 2011 study of older, homeless women published in the *Journal of Women & Aging*, as well as her long-standing personal commitment to the homeless. She's been a faithful volunteer at St. Vincent for more than 20 years.

"Through my research, I realized how difficult it is to be in the shelter," Davis-Berman said. "Shelter life can be stressful. It can be a very noisy place. There's no place to go for any peace and quiet."

She thought yoga could provide some stress relief and help the women learn relaxation techniques. She talked it over with her yoga instructor Farkas and Ann Goebel, the then-director of the St. Vincent program, who were both enthusiastic. Farkas volunteered to teach the class and Goebel cleared roadblocks and set aside space for the weekly class.

Participation is entirely voluntary and the class ebbs and flows as women move in and out of the shelter. About the longest anyone has participated is five months. Since the class began, about 50 individuals have participated — mostly women in their 40s, but a few men and children as well.

Their work is garnering national attention; they co-authored an article about the homeless yoga program due to be published in October in the *International Journal of Yoga Therapy*.

"We never know who will be in the class," said Farkas, owner of a yoga and stress management practice, Bridge to Health Ohio, in Beavercreek. "They come in at widely varying levels of skill, nearly nine-months pregnant, in wheelchairs, with coughs and colds, broken bones and end-stage kidney disease."

Each class is different, they said. Skill levels typically vary widely and might include a former dancer with good flexibility, older women with several disabilities or even an entire family — mother, father, adult daughter.

With uncertainty about how long anyone might be at the shelter, Davis-Berman and Farkas quickly threw out lesson plans to build skills progressively and focused instead on teaching relaxation techniques. They added chair exercises and adapted some for wheelchairs. From a slow start, the number of participants grew by word-of-mouth from shelter residents who loved the class.

An older woman in a wheelchair told her that it was the first time she had ever felt her shoulders relax. Still another wanted to come back to the class after she was housed and asked for recordings of Farkas' relaxation meditation.

"I have them envision a safe place that lifts their spirits and is safe and comfortable," Farkas said. "It goes along with visualization, that if you can create an environment where your body feels good and relaxed, your whole being will benefit."

Farkas and Davis-Berman say they never know who will show up or who, sometimes after months of faithful attendance, will suddenly disappear.

That's required a considerable mind shift for Farkas, who usually works to foster relationships with students and progressively build their skills over time. But with her St. Vincent students, she wants something a bit different.

"As a yoga teacher, I want them to be in my class, but on a personal level, I want them not to be in class," Farkas said. "I want to see them out of the shelter and placed in a home or program. I just hope I can teach them a relaxation technique or two that will help them in their lives while they are here and after they leave."

Goebel, who now oversees all of the Gateway programs for St. Vincent de Paul, said life in a congregate shelter is anything but normal and the yoga classes fit into efforts they make to normalize that experience as much as possible.

"By participating in things that people in homeless shelters don't typically do, it gives them interesting experiences and helps activate positive behavior. I'm so thrilled for these women," Goebel said. "Yoga is very calming and that's very good in a congregate setting."

Farkas and Davis-Berman acknowledge the homeless face enormous problems in navigating the system and dealing with the issues leading to their situation.

"Are we doing anything to solve the problem of homelessness? No." said Farkas. "But we're making a micro-improvement in some people's lives. Even a few minutes is healing."

Farkas and Davis-Berman said the experience has been humbling for them, and recounted what happened when they decided to give their class a Christmas gift.

"We brought some fuzzy socks. Who doesn't like that?" said Farkas. "We passed them out to our class and then so many other people started coming to the door asking for them. Now we come every week with socks."

"A pair of socks makes a huge difference," she said.

So does an hour of yoga.

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