

Community Yoga Project

Statement of Purpose:

Yoga, a practice that combines meditation, physical movements and breath work, originated in India and was brought to the West in the 19th century.¹ The practice of yoga is a proven tool for emotional and physical wellness.² Unfortunately, through the process of appropriation in the West, yoga has become a commercial industry that is marketed predominantly to a privileged demographic. As an experienced yoga teacher, I have seen the numerous benefits of yoga, yet have also seen how access to this practice is mostly limited to racial and class privileged individuals. Yoga studios are often located in affluent neighborhoods and classes are catered to the lifestyles of privileged individuals. In order to address this inequality, I am proposing a social justice yoga project, entitled Community Yoga Project, that would expand access to yoga in marginalized communities by holding yoga classes at various social justice organizations in Berkeley and Oakland.

Due to historic and current marginalization, many low-income, communities of color experience poverty, unemployment, pollution and the effects of environmental racism, lack of access to healthcare and healthy food options and violence.^{3 4} As a result, these communities are more likely to suffer from trauma and posttraumatic stress disorder. Studies have shown that trauma is stored in the body and thus addressing trauma solely with talk therapy is not as effective as addressing trauma with yoga.⁵ The main consequence of post-traumatic stress is the inability to self-regulate; yoga is a powerful tool that teaches students to self-regulate through focusing on the breath and connecting mind and body.⁶ Yoga combines both physical movement and mindfulness practice,

which creates a space for students to reflect and learn to manage stress, anxiety and depression. In addition, yoga has many physical health benefits: increased flexibility, strength building, protection and prevention from arthritis and back pain, improvement in posture and neck/back problems associated with posture, maintenance of joint, cartilage and spinal disk health, decreased levels of the stress hormone cortisol, increased blood flow and circulation, drainage of the lymphatic system, elimination of cancerous cells and cellular functioning toxic waste, improvement in cardiovascular conditioning and bone health, weight management and reduction in blood sugar and LDL cholesterol.⁷

In my project, I will be teaching a total of ten classes per week at nine different social justice organizations in the East Bay. Utilizing my teaching skills and students' feedback, I will think critically and design yoga sequences that address the needs of the specific communities I am working with. I have already met with all the organizations and they are enthusiastic about the possibility of holding yoga classes. Together, we have determined a regular space and time for yoga classes. All these organizations serve disenfranchised communities with their services; providing yoga would be an extra service for these organizations to offer in their objectives of social justice. In addition to the actual yoga, I will provide check-ins at the beginning of class to foster a sense of community, maximize the healing potential of the class and so that I can mold each class session to the emotional and physical needs of students on a day-by-day basis.

This project directly addresses societal health structures that create and perpetrate lack of access to healthcare, healthy foods and health services in low-income communities. Providing access to the transformative and powerful practice of yoga will serve the public good by improving the emotional and physical health and wellness of

marginalized communities in the East Bay. This project is informed by a desire to change the problematic appropriation of yoga in the West by expanding access to the myriad of benefits of yoga.

Project plan:

After purchasing all the necessary materials for the classes such as mats, blocks, straps, blankets, etc., I will begin the project by facilitating participatory community engagement meetings in order to determine the needs of the specific community and how to create classes that address those needs. After this, I will start teaching weekly classes at each organization, including specialized classes such as a mother's class (see weekly calendar below). I will measure the progress of my project by getting written feedback from students every two months as well as verbal feedback after each session. The overall outcome of this project is to improve the mental and physical wellness of underserved communities of the Oakland/Berkeley region. In addition, over the year, I will compile a manual with yoga sequences that can be a resource for both students and teachers alike. It is my goal that this project can serve as a foundation for an expandable social justice yoga program. The following organizations have enthusiastically agreed to partner with me for the implementation of the social justice yoga project:

Phat Beets Produce

Phat Beets Produce aims to create a healthier, more equitable food system in North Oakland through providing affordable access to fresh produce, facilitating youth leadership in health and nutrition education, and connecting small farmers to urban communities via the creation of farm stands, farmers' markets, and urban youth market gardens.

North County Women's Center:

The NCWC, located in Berkeley, provides the programs and services necessary to help homeless women and their children make the transition out of homelessness and

emergency services into permanent or long-term transitional housing. The disabilities that NCWC clients exhibit include psychiatric disabilities, substance abuse disorders, HIV/AIDS and/or related illnesses, developmental disabilities, physical disabilities and trauma from domestic violence.

Causa Justa :: Just Cause

Through rights-based services, policy campaigns, civic engagement, and direct action, CJJC improves conditions in neighborhoods of the San Francisco Bay Area, and contribute to building the larger multi-racial, multi-generational movement needed for fundamental change. Born from a visionary merger between a Black organization and a Latino immigrant organization, they build bridges of solidarity between working class communities of color.

Energy Solidarity Cooperative

ESC, located in Oakland, is an incubator for community power in the most disproportionately affected communities; historically marginalized, oppressed and low-income populations. Simultaneously, they know that incubating such projects in a cooperative, democratic and participatory fashion will enable more individuals and households to be part of the clean energy economy and foster community-based development.

Planting Justice

Planting Justice is a non-profit organization based in Oakland dedicated to food justice, economic justice, and sustainable local food systems. Planting Justice has trained over 400 underserved urban residents, such as low-income youth and the formerly incarcerated from San Quentin, in organic food production using permaculture design.

Multicultural Community Center at UC Berkeley

The MCC exists as a multipurpose community center that aims to provide an educational space for the critical study and practice of multiculturalism, provide a welcoming, inclusive space for students from different cultures, provide an alternative space for cultural expressions and identity exploration and build community among UC Berkeley's diverse students.

Oakland Rising

Oakland Rising educates and mobilizes voters in the flatlands to speak up for and take charge of the issues impacting their lives. They are a multilingual, multiracial collaborative with deep roots in East and West Oakland's neighborhoods, proving that everyday residents working together have the power to change the way the city is run.

Communities for a Better Environment at Tassafaronga Recreation Center

CBE's environmental health and justice work in East Oakland promotes a variety of essential aspects of healthy community—access to clean air and the availability of quality, healthful food. Tassafaronga Recreation Center, located in East Oakland, partners with CBE and other institutions to accommodate community oriented programming.

The Living Room Project

The Living Room Project, located in West Oakland, is an accessible healing justice practice/community space for queer and trans people of color and allies.

Weekly Class Schedule:

<i>Monday</i>	<i>Tuesday</i>	<i>Wednesday</i>	<i>Thursday</i>	<i>Friday</i>
CBE (mom class) 12-1:30	Planting Justice 8:30-10 am	Just Cause 8:00-9:30 am	The Living Room Project 9:00-10:30 am	ESC 12-1:30
CBE 5:30-7 pm	NCWC 5:45-7:15 pm	Phat Beets 6:30-8 pm	Oakland Rising 2-3:30 pm	MCC

Continuity and preparation:

At UC Berkeley, I majored in Peace and Conflict studies and engaged extensively with issues around global and local inequality. My project is informed by my academic experience and grows out of my longstanding commitment to social justice. Furthermore, many of my UC Berkeley classes have highlighted the way that processes of colonialism effect nations, communities and individuals. I bring this awareness into my teaching as I strive to create classes that take the impact of historical structures of oppression into account. This diverges from the majority of yoga classes held in the Bay Area that perpetuate commercialization of yoga and inequalities in access to health resources. Furthermore, I have also studied identity and how the intersection of race, gender and class creates dynamics of power, privilege and marginalization. More specifically, in the class Transnational Feminisms with Professor Paola Bacchetta, I conducted research regarding the processes of appropriation and orientalism in the field of yoga—please see my sample work. I endeavor to teach in a way that is sensitive to difference and diverse identities.

At UC Berkeley, I was the co-founder of the Women's Consciousness Raising Group DeCal. I co-facilitated this class for three years; this work applies to this project as it helped me develop my teaching and facilitation skills. As a result, I am well attuned to group process skills such as guided check-ins and check-outs. I will provide these check-ins as a part of the yoga classes to enhance the sense of connection and healing between student and teacher. Furthermore, the DeCal helped me cultivate a sense of awareness in regards to feminist, gender and race issues. This is directly relevant to my yoga classes as I strive to provide an environment that is sensitive to the needs of diverse bodies and identities.

In addition to my UC Berkeley education, I participated in the Yoga Tree Teacher training 200-hour program and am therefore a certified yoga teacher. I have been trained in alignment, anatomy, philosophy, methodology, assisting, sequencing, breath work, teacher ethics and history. Since graduating from the teacher training, I have taught private classes, small community classes and women's retreats. In addition, while I was studying abroad in Vietnam, I taught yoga twice a week as a fundraiser for the One Heartland Vietnam charity project. These classes were featured on the Vietnamese news (Please see link— yoga starts at 2:47: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLuxf_WYb24).⁸ Teaching yoga in Vietnam helped me build the skill of teaching to multicultural and multilingual students.

The social justice yoga project would continue my UC Berkeley coursework by addressing systemic forms of exclusion and creating spaces that are aware and supportive of marginalized identities and communities. My social justice oriented education at UC Berkeley and my yoga teacher training at Yoga Tree have prepared me with the skills I

need to take on this project. I am very passionate and committed to social justice and I know first hand the transformative power of the yoga practice. I feel that through the process of collaboration with social justice organizations and communities, yoga classes will provide a space for personal and community transformation in terms of both physical and emotional health.

¹ <http://www.abc-of-yoga.com/beginnersguide/yogahistory.asp>

² <http://www.yogajournal.com/health/2532>

³ <http://oaklandunite.org/about/research-and-reports/>

⁴ <http://www.cbecal.org/organizing/northern-california/>

⁵ http://www.traumacenter.org/clients/..%5Cproducts%5Cpdf_files%5CIJYT_article_2009.pdf

⁶ <http://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=7nFGfkeFiFgC&oi=fnd&pg=PT5&dq=yoga+and+trauma&ots=vSsuL8kTQf&sig=YcU3BXJeB-9dfvkjsUHij0ortLk>

⁷ <http://www.yogajournal.com/health/1634>

⁸ http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLuxf_WYb24

