

Inner-City Students Get 'Om Schooling' in Yoga

Meditation: Instructors hope free classes will help needy youngsters find inner peace.

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It's a sunny morning in South-Central Los Angeles, and former movie producer Tara Lynda Guber is breathing deeply. But as she begins her yoga class with a circle of attentive inner-city children, she first tries to grapple with a hor-

ror that all the higher consciousness in the world cannot banish.

Seated in the lotus position, her muscular frame clothed in black sweats, Guber tells the children gently that yes, the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon were a terrible thing, "but that doesn't mean the whole world is bad, but that there are

people who don't know right from wrong."

"And one of the things that we can do with that, one of the places we can go to, is to go inside of ourselves and find the place where we can truly find what is right and wrong for us," Guber says.

The children—who live in neighborhoods where the rat-a-tat-tat of stray violence punctuates homework, kickball and the more ordinary items on the morning up
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Instructor Tara Lynda Guber, left, teaches yoga with student Mayra Flores, right.

YOGA: 'Om Schooling' Aids Inner-City Students

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agenda—close their eyes, their faces as guileless and inscrutable as the private world of childhood.

"We can be grateful we are here in such a safe place," Guber says in a soothing tone. "We can be happy to be here together to stretch, let our bodies open and our minds be set free, so that perhaps when we leave our yoga class we can move into another mind-set. More at peace with ourselves and others."

This is what Yoga Journal calls "Om Schooling."

Here at the Accelerated School, a high-performing campus that serves kindergarten through eighth grade, Guber is giving brainy underprivileged children a head start in high-end hatha.

Guber, the wife of Hollywood film producer Peter Guber, is bringing yoga to the people—and trying to give the children something she and her friends find a great comfort in this age of anxiety.

"This is their birthright too," Guber said. "Consciousness is for everybody."

Guber is not America's only yoga apostle. Pro bono yogis across the country are teaching yoga to prisoners, pregnant teenagers, people in halfway houses and at Boys and Girls clubs. Guber even invited one of South-Central's yoga-baptized gang members to detail his newfound inner peace at a symposium.

Yoga May Aid Test Scores, Educators Say

The yoga missionaries may be on to something: Researchers are studying whether meditation reduces hypertension in African Americans—and administrators at the Accelerated School believe it could be helping the children attain their celebrated test scores.

Guber, a member of the school's Board of Trustees, believes good yoga habits start early.

"If only the kids in New York could have had that tool to sit down

and go inside to say, 'You know what, we are going to remain strong in this.' To say, 'We are going to be the light.'" she said.

Should you doubt the depth of Guber's sincerity, follow her up a winding mountain road to her Beverly Hills estate and the spiritual base of her mission: the Yoga House. Inside this Italianate retreat, a wall of leaded-glass windows frames a sweeping city view. A beautifully painted Sanskrit salutation, "Namaste," greets you. "We bow to the divine in one other," Guber translates.

On a recent night, dozens of people crowded in to greet legendary 1960s guru Ram Dass, who is 70. They shed their shoes at the door, filling a rack with everything from Birkenstocks to Manolo Blahniks. Sitting in a circle at his feet, they poured out the emotions that were raging in their hearts since Sept. 11.

"I felt that everyone who had been killed was a family member," one woman said. "I've lived long

enough to feel we're so close, we're so connected."

"Then," she said, "I get to the place with the terrorists and my heart hits a wall. I cannot forgive. I can't include them in my family. I'm feeling the limits of my compassion."

This is a tough one, even for the best guru. Ram Dass, the former Richard Albert, sat silently in his wheelchair.

Then he waded in with a treatise on seeing people as a universal dance of souls reincarnating themselves into new bodies with new psyches.

"When you bring those terrorists into your mind," he said, "you're turning yourself off, which you complain about. We judge, often, to separate ourselves. They hijacked the planes because they didn't care about Americans, and you not caring about the terrorists is feeling the same thing they're feeling."

"Because each human heart is part of what's going to change things around here."

Some people closed their eyes, as Ram Dass compared the terrorist attack with his own brush with mortality. Like his stroke, the tragedy was "fierce grace."

"The culture got a stroke," he said. "It awakened everyone to 'What are we doing here? Who are we? Isn't anybody in charge?'"

"To me," he said, "that's awakening."

It is from this mecca that the flame-haired Guber makes her way down the hill to introduce gifted South-Central children to a physical release that, for her and millions of other Americans, has replaced jogging.

Children Enjoy Learning Poses

At the Accelerated School, the children in Guber's class are opening their eyes now, watching intently for her next move. The Crane? The Cat? The walls are decorated with kaleidoscopic mandalas, colorful drawings of yoga positions—the Cobra, the Downward Dog—and signs that say things such as, "What is special and unique about you?" or "Flow/Change/Adapt."

"Irving, why don't you lead us?" Guber says, and a dark-eyed 12-year-old with an earnest gaze stands up and balances slowly on one leg, leaning forward and stretching his arms out like wings.

This is a peaceful plane—not a fireball missile piloted by terrorist hijackers.

The other children quickly scramble into place, until they are as gracefully arched as ballet dancers.

"That's a good pose. Do we breathe in?" Guber asks Irving Sanchez, reassuring everyone that "if we lose our balance, that's just part of the pose."

Next, a wiry, energetic sixth-grader, Victoria Monroe, 11, leads everyone in the Tree pose.

"Ooh, I like this. Would you like to be my assistant?" Guber says as the irrepressible Victoria beams and wriggles merrily.

Guber asks the children to assume the lotus position.

"When there are bad things going on in the world, we can help change things. Let's imagine we're sitting in the sun." she says slowly, turning her face upward. "A glowing orange ball, bringing in the light."

Guber opens her eyes.

"Thank you all for being such great yogis! Namaste," she says, and the kids answer in unison: "Namaste."

'Yoga Makes Me Feel Better'

Many of the students are children of Latin American immigrants and are still getting acquainted with yoga culture, though they nod their heads receptively when Guber talks about a maharishi in Virginia.

"My cousin thinks it's dumb," Irving said. "I thought it was dumb too, with all the funny names like Flower pose and Rocket pose. Now, if I come in with a headache or I didn't sleep well, yoga makes me feel better."

An eighth-grader, Alan Varela, said yoga relaxation techniques help him fight off anxiety before tests.

"Yoga can help me a lot with my future," Alan, 13, said. "I'll have harder times. There'll be high school, college, Stanford 9. Yoga will help me get through."

Alan is echoing a belief that put yoga in the school's physical education curriculum.

Kevin Svéd, the school's co-director, said yoga improves the students' focus and concentration.

"It's fairly innovative. It's not done in many public schools, and in inner-city schools it's not done at all," Svéd said. "Our scores are really high in comparison to scores

in our neighborhood, so there's a lot of eyes on us. There's a synergistic effect."

It was Guber's idea to sponsor a yoga program, which is beginning its second year as part of the curriculum. Guber was on the ground floor of the Accelerated School effort in 1994, when Wells Fargo pitched in more than \$200,000 to help it get started. She was instrumental in obtaining the school site, a onetime designer clothing factory owned by a friend, Carole Little. Little donated the factory to the Cal State L.A. Foundation, which leases it to the school for \$1 a year.

Now, Guber would like to build a "Yoga House South-Central" at the school, "so there's a place for the spirit to go to."

Seeking to Build a Spiritual Haven

Carmen Flores, an immigrant from Guanajuato, Mexico, with two children at the school, said she would love to take yoga classes there. Her children are already teaching her at home.

"My little boy was very hyperactive. This helps him concentrate," Flores said in Spanish.

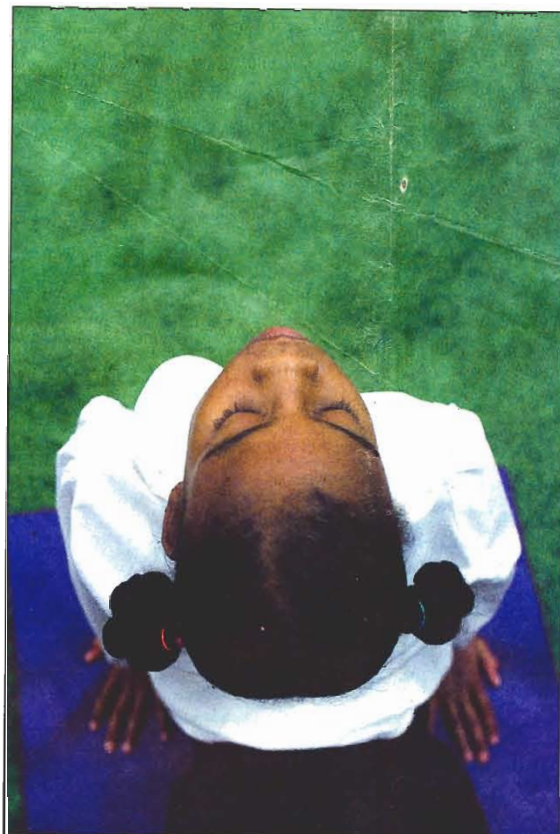
After years on the Hollywood merry-go-round, it is feedback like this that boosts her karma now.

"These people who live in the inner city, why shouldn't they be as much able to embrace the world of consciousness as anybody else?" Guber asked.

When Lynda Guber embraced the world of consciousness, she added the name Tara—a wise goddess in the Tibetan and Hindu cosmologies who, Guber says, makes dreams come true—to her name. And she built a spiritual haven, drawing from a tradition that dates to the days when swamies mingled in old Hollywood among people of the stature of Aldous Huxley—people whose quests led them far from the bounds of organized religion.

Guber said the children at the school would benefit from Yoga House speakers, maybe Deepak Choprah, "people who can get down and speak about life"—a life that seems so uncertain in the wake of what some now refer to in shorthand as "911."

"There's a new mind-set going out there. One with more consciousness," Guber said. "We've got to be part of the light. If not, we're doomed."



Photos by CLARENCE WILLIAMS / Los Angeles Times

Victoria Monroe, 11, gets into a yoga position. Despite early skepticism, the students say they find the exercises helpful in easing stress and aiding concentration.