This is an interview with Char Grossman, who is a Therapeutic Yoga Specialist and a Nationally Certified School Psychologist. In 2004, Char founded YogaReach, a therapeutic yoga program that inspires individuals of all ages and abilities to develop educational, physical, mental and social competencies through mind and body techniques.

Instruction is provided for individuals/groups with special needs and people experiencing medical challenges. Char is an author of diversified blogs and a panelist for CureTalks, a medical trends program. She also works with InMotion, a community-based nonprofit organization for people with Parkinson's Disease and Movement Disorders.

Rob: What originally motivated you to do this work and what continues to motivate you? How, if at all, has that motivation changed over time?

In 1993 I underwent a left temporal craniotomy for a bleeding vascular malformation. The surgery was 5 hours and although the malformation was removed, it left me with my reading, memory, and fine and gross motor functions severely impaired -- yet I still understood everything. I was a school psychologist who serviced people with disabilities, and now I was disabled. I lost my skills as a wife and mother and became depressed.

After about 15 months of physical therapy, I attended a "Healing with Power Yoga" Astanga program run by Beryl Bender Birch and Thom Birch. Beryl taught me how to connect my mind, body and breath. As I progressed in my yoga training I had an epiphany: if I could bring my physical, mental, and spiritual disabilities to a healthy level, I can teach others to do it as well. That's why I founded YogaReach.

What continues to motivate me is the inspiration I receive from my students in the community. I share this love and passion with a team of devoted teachers whom I trained, and who now work with me in community centers throughout northeast Ohio.

Is there a standout moment from your work at YogaReach?

I have been fortunate to be involved in many breakout moments. One recent event involved a 26-year-old with Down Syndrome. I’ve known Leesa since she was a toddler. She lived in the school district where I worked. The past ten years she has participated in YogaReach. One day as class was beginning, I received a text from Leesa saying she would be a few minutes late to class. The class began with a simple breath exercise while we waited. Leesa walked into the room. She ran over, hugged me, and then hugged a few friends who were seated on mats. We were calm, collected, and breathing. As Leesa rolled out her mat, she began asking how everyone’s workday was. Socialization skills are a part of this class. As Leesa arrived, she took over as a well-trained yoga teacher; she has great communication skills. Individuals with Down Syndrome vary from mild to severe, and Leesa tests in a mild
range. I was so proud of Leesa’s accomplishments; and as we started Sun Salutation A, tears swelled in my eyes. I’m so lucky to have Leesa as my teacher, on and off the mat.

**What did you know about the population you are working with before you began teaching? What were some of the assumptions you had about this population and how have those assumptions changed?**

I knew nothing about these populations until I was registering for my freshman year at the University of Cincinnati. I was majoring in Elementary Education, and the registration line was out the door and all the way down the hall. There were only six students in the Deaf Education line. I nonchalantly strolled past the long line into the Deaf Education line, and 3 years later, I was teaching a Deaf/Hard of Hearing class in Cincinnati Public Schools. Now I have a Master’s degree in Learning Disabilities/Behavioral Disorders from Ohio State, as well as a post-masters degree in school psychology.

I understood that in addition to following the protocols in my field, I had to address the student's personal side, just as I did during my own recovery. I then realized my mission was to inspire individuals of all ages and abilities through physical, educational, mental, and social skills.

**What is the role of humor in your practice, in your classes?**

I use humor in my practice to take advantage of the good feeling it emotionally and physically gives you. Humor helps you keep a positive, optimistic outlook throughout all types of situations. In the group classes, I might use a meaningless word when I give directions, and the students will catch me and laugh. At times, if one of my students is aggravated and suddenly stomps his foot, I might ask him to show me how to do that "dance" step. I'll begin to dance with my foot stomping and my whole body moving. The student begins to laugh and forgets about what almost set him off. The rest of the class then joins us in dance and laughing. It is so beneficial to use humor as a part of your class because it reduces stress and increases energy, which enables you to stay focused and accomplish much more.

**What has been the greatest challenge in your teaching experience and what tools have you developed for addressing that challenge?**

My greatest challenge is understanding the business side of YogaReach. I am a teacher, not an MBA, and have never worked in the corporate world. I have learned to develop staff schedules, mentorship training programs, histories of clients, locations of classes, revenue, workshops, and structure of the programs. Although I have a team, I am the one running the business.

To help streamline this, I created a dashboard that contains all these components. The tasks are separated by tabs and related to different areas of need. Seeing these lists is a great tool.
and one that has helped me spend more time creating and developing the program structure.

What advice would you give to anyone who is going to teach physically challenged individuals?
If you are going to teach people who experience physical challenges, it is very important that you have educated and familiarized yourself about the person's diagnosis and/or disability. Although the person may have physical challenges, each person has different emotional, physical, mental, and behavioral characteristics as well. This first step is a critical part of the healing process because becoming conscious of what is occurring is the most fundamental part of the process of holistic healing.

Additional necessary steps include conducting an Intake/Check-in assessment, doing a Body Awareness Screening, develop an Individualized Lesson Plan for the class structure, Modifying Poses, Conducting Mindfulness/Guided Imagery and ending with a class or individual discussion.

The most important advice I would give anyone who is interested is to teach to the abilities, not the disabilities.

What are some of your ideas about or hopes for the future of "service yoga" in America in the next decade?
I would like to see some yoga studios that offer teacher-training programs add instruction on teaching people with disabilities and medical challenges. It would be so beneficial if volunteers particularly in underserved communities could learn to instruct these special populations.

How has this work changed your definition of service? Your definition of yoga? Your practice?
For YogaReach, the service opportunities are endless. We have many affiliates, and we are in the process of expanding through workshops and mentorships. Yoga can help everyone in some way. Age is irrelevant. Whether you are a teenager or a senior, your mind and body will benefit. The magic of yoga helps everyone lead a happy, more healthy and productive daily life. As my mentor, Beryl Bender Birch quoted, "Every person is a best seller".

Editor: Alice Trembour
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