

by Amanda Grasmeyer



Though new owner Kat McKinney's journey to yoga might seem like an accident by happenstance, it is clear that she has found a passion that keeps her going.

McKinney was diagnosed with Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma at age 21. It showed up in the end of her right thigh bone, put her on crutches for six months and consistently threatened to take her leg from her among the other various concerns it brought forth. After successfully completing cancer treatment, she was in great desire of getting more mobile and building back up the muscles in her leg.

She returned to college and decided to sign up for a fitness class to help with her commitment to improve her physical well-being. The strength training class she initially wanted to sign up for was full, so McKinney signed up for yoga, and she and her doctor quickly started seeing a shockingly significant change in her body.

When reflecting on that time of her life and the role yoga played, McKinney says, "As long as I maintained my practice, my leg didn't hurt. I could feel how good it was for me, and I really enjoyed it. It was just what I needed." She notes that she was able to affect her health in a positive way with yoga and that so many other people can do the same thing.

A new job brought McKinney to Grand Rapids from Ann Arbor in 2005 and she says she was happy to find a welcoming yoga community at The Yoga Studio with Carolyn Heines, founder, and her other talented teachers. In addition, she continued to travel back to Ann Arbor regularly where she studied with the teacher who is now her primary mentor, Sue Salaniuk. Though she wasn't ever intending to teach yoga, after taking many classes, Heines surprised her when she asked her to substitute teach a few classes in 2006, and by 2007, she had her own class. She says "Teaching quickly became the highlight of my week."

With a strong desire to get away from having a desk job, McKinney went back to school in 2008 to become a physical therapist assistant, a discipline she says complements her yoga studies well. Soon after that, she and Heines began discussions that lead to a five-year plan to acquire The Yoga Studio. Heines and McKinney worked together to progressively turn the studio over to McKinney, all while protecting the vision of the studio and being sure that it would continue on to be as well respected as what Heines had built up in her many years of expert guidance and teaching. McKinney says "Carolyn is truly a Grand Rapids treasure and I recognize that I've got a big role to fill."

The Yoga Studio has a long-standing history with Grand Rapids. It began in 1979 when Heines started offering yoga to the community in various locations and then eventually opened up a permanent studio. The studio has thrived in Grand Rapids under Heines, and as of January first of this year, the reins are now in the highly qualified McKinney's hands.

McKinney is a Certified Iyengar Yoga Teacher, making The Yoga Studio the only studio to offer the Iyengar practice in Grand Rapids. Iyengar is a form of Hatha Yoga that has an emphasis on detail, precision and alignment in the performance of posture (asana) and breath control (pranayama). Much more than that, it allows The Yoga Studio to accommodate just about anybody and to truly teach "how" to practice instead of simply having students watch and follow as best as they can.

Achieving this certification requires dedication to a lifetime of studentship. Candidates for this first level of certification study under the guidance of two Certified Iyengar Yoga teachers to learn a body of material. A three-part assessment comes next, which entails an observed practice, a written exam on philosophy, sequencing, anatomy, etc. and an observance of the candidate

as he/she teaches a short class. The assessment is set up to clearly determine whether or not the individual is qualified and able to teach people safely. McKinney adds, "It's not just 'I do my hours, I get the certificate. Candidates for certification must demonstrate their knowledge. And there are 12 more levels of assessment that can be earned beyond this initial step. Iyengar certification is very thorough."

While not all styles of yoga teach in the way the Iyengar method does, McKinney stands by the method and says, "If you're going to be helpful to the average American, you must be able to give them something that's physically appropriate and helpful and not just crank through a class."

Being there for her students is what she loves, and seeing someone who thought they couldn't practice come to the understanding that they can do more than they thought possible excites her.

Speaking from experience, McKinney says, "Life isn't perfect; it throws all kinds of surprises at you." She was surprised at 21 by Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma, she was surprised by the effect yoga had on her body during recovery and she was surprised in 2006 when she was asked to substitute teach a yoga class, but today she knows that she's doing exactly what she was meant to do.

"To me, it's a practice for life. Beyond the physical aspect, your practice has an effect on the mind, the spirit and the emotions. It gives you the resilience to cope with the ups and downs of life. It gives you the tools to cope with the world."

*The Yoga Studio is located at 955 Cherry St. SE in Grand Rapids. For more information, call 616-776-0836, email [Info@gryoga.com](mailto:Info@gryoga.com) or visit [GRYoga.com](http://GRYoga.com). A celebration will be held in the spring to celebrate the new ownership of The Yoga Studio. See ad, page 16.*

*Amanda Grasmeyer is a frequent contributor to Natural Awakenings Magazine. You can contact her at [MandiGrasmeyer@gmail.com](mailto:MandiGrasmeyer@gmail.com).*