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Stretching Awareness

By Catherine S. Mitseas

Photography by David Newton Dunn



Chris Acosta in his St. Petersburg yoga studio

Tampa Bay's yoga scene is not a rich pallet with a kaleidoscope of choices. Rather, it is more like a spare garden, with patches of flowers between long stretches of green.

Surprisingly, though, most gyms have one or two yoga classes on their schedules. And there are dedicated yoga studios that teach in a variety of styles as well as many excellent teachers clustered in and around St. Petersburg and South Tampa.

One of the bay area's best-known yoga teachers is Chris Acosta. His classes blend the relaxing and physical sides of yoga, which has made him popular with yoga aficionados.

But it's his success story that captures imaginations. Acosta, now the owner of

St. Petersburg Yoga, found yoga as a teen, when he was nearly crippled with severe scoliosis and wearing a back brace. Faced with having to undergo surgery on his spine, he sought out Claude Griffin, a longtime yogi in Clearwater.

"I felt like a little old man. I always had some kind of pain going on.... Two months into this [yoga] practice, I was able to open up this little window of no pain. When you always know pain, it's a weird thing to take it away. It gave me hope," says Acosta.

Through yoga, he avoided radical surgery involving rod implantations and was able, one year later, to live pain-free. "I've lengthened my body, reclaimed space in my spine," he says.

From here, yoga became his obses-

sion. He spent three years in training. And for eight years, he would teach anyone, never taking a dime, choosing instead to work in his family's business and give back yoga in gratitude.

Today, at age thirty-nine, he teaches forty classes a week, both private and in his studio, employs five instructors, and works with everyone from the wheelchair bound to the professional ballerina. "He is slow moving" and interested in perfection while in pose, says Tim Ganley, owner of Central Avenue Fitness in St. Petersburg and an accomplished yoga instructor.

Acosta describes it as building bridges. "I am not interested in what you are good at," he says. "The yoga practice will show you where you're in need. >>>

HEALTH

That's where it's rich, and for some people, that's not too fun."

A pioneer of the bay area yoga scene, Claude Griffin, owns Lifework Yoga Center in Clearwater with his wife, Martha Landry. Griffin began practicing yoga forty-five years ago. First trained in the Iyengar style, Griffin rejects teaching one particular style. Instead, he prefers to teach the *student*. "We try to structure our class to overcome whatever condition they might want to surmount," he says.

Yoga, so say its teachers, is about more than physical exercise. The process of bringing good health to the body and balance to the muscles results in mental well-being and the ability to handle life in a more peaceful way.

Val Spies, owner of the Lotus Room in South Tampa and ten-year practitioner, says, "The intent of the physical component of yoga was [for the ancient

masters] to prepare for meditation."

Indeed, in her previous career as a corporate manager for an airline, she used yoga to counter the tensions of corporate life.

Eager to escape a job where her task was to fire people, she opened her studio four years ago without a teacher and before she was fully certified. "I was the last person they would see before losing their jobs," says Spies. "These people were unable to deal with the stress in their lives and their performance was suffering. I decided I did not want to be on that end of people's lives anymore."

Today her studio integrates meditation into every class, seeking a way to allow individuals to strip away the tensions in their lives. "Yoga is about understanding your body, how to relax and go to that place of quiet and peacefulness." **DR**

