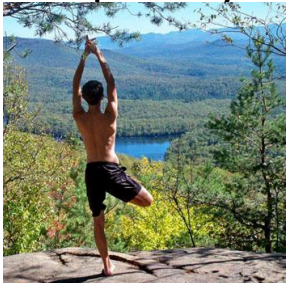


Yoga in the Adirondacks

ADK Yoga brings brings natural light and humor into the practice of yoga

Story by **Felicia Bonanno**

Photos provided by Luis Sierra and Elizabeth Yokum



Will Breyette, 17, started taking classes at ADK Yoga after having surgery at just 13. He is now "quite the dynamic yogi."

Tucked away in the center of a booming brick building in Plattsburgh, N.Y., is a closed door. Inside is the cozy, dimly lit waiting room to **ADK Yoga**. Padded chairs sit in front of a table piled high with Yoga magazines and a shoe rack is placed against the wall, inviting people to go barefoot before stepping into the adjacent studio.

At quarter to five, yogis start trickling into the bright studio with bare feet and smiling faces, ready for their hour and fifteen minutes of relaxing and simultaneously invigorating beginner's yoga class.

A little history

ADK Yoga, which opened at 22 US Oval in Plattsburgh in 2003, teaches all levels of **Hatha** yoga, from beginner to vigorous.

"Usually when people talk about doing yoga in the United States they are talking about Hatha yoga," says instructor Luis Sierra, who co-owns the studio with his wife and fellow instructor/psychotherapist Elizabeth Yokum. "It's a style, just as Toyota and Ford are styles of cars."

"We try to adapt every class and pose to fit everyone."

Here are several branches of Hatha yoga, such as **Bikram** (hot yoga) and Anusara. Hatha is simply about harmonizing the body and the breath through poses, or asanas. ADK Yoga also offers several workshops, including a restorative yoga workshop, a mindfulness-based stress reduction program, and "Constructing Our World," a seminar with Sierra, who studied Buddhism, about living life more consciously. Sierra and Yokum offer private and semi-private lessons, mindfulness-based cognitive therapy for depression, and will adapt the program to fit a customer's individual needs and wants.

"We try to adapt every class and pose to fit everyone," says Elizabeth "Libby" Yokum. "Someone might not be really flexible but they are really strong, and someone might be the other way around. Overall, yoga is absolutely for everyone, though. It's a way of being. It's a philosophy."

The class

The studio is painted white, and soft afternoon light filters in through the several windows lining the far right wall, illuminating the white paint. The room is very zen, with flowering purple orchids and other plants, smooth stones and seashells, statues of deities such as Buddha, and candles decorating the window sills. The opposite wall is painted with inspirational words such as "Patience," "Non-judging," and "Letting go," all in sky blue. Colorful, framed drawings (done by the multi-talented Sierra) are

hung from the wall. The blue carpet is soft and smooth, as well, and racks on the back wall hold neatly rolled up mats, cushions, blocks, and ropes.

The barefoot yogis who enter the zen studio range in age, from older to younger, and men and women lay down their mats and cushions and begin stretching out as Sierra greets each of them. Relaxing music plays unassumingly in the background as everyone settles in, facing toward the far wall where Sierra sits facing his students.

When it is time to begin, Sierra asks us to sit down in a position that is comfortable and to close our eyes before leading us verbally through instructions to relax each part of our body. Then, he instructs us to repeat after him in echo form. He begins to chant in foreign words, and we repeat after him, eyes still closed. Although we don't know what we are saying, a sense of peace and relaxation slowly pervades the room as we echo his almost sing-song, foreign tongues. He asks us to set an intention for this class in our minds, whether it be for ourselves, our bodies, or something going on somewhere else.



The ADK Yoga studio is decorated with candles, inspirational quotes, artwork, and mini deity statues on the windowsills.

Slowly we begin to do poses. Sierra stands at the front of the room and demonstrates once what we should do, taking us through sun salutation and offering modifications with blocks for anyone not feeling up for certain positions. Then, he allows us to continue on at our own pace while he stands in front watching and guiding with his voice.

"Remember to breathe," he says.

Sierra takes us through several more flows, offering modifications for certain poses along the way. Some of the poses are more demanding than others, but nothing feels strained or pressured. The atmosphere is relaxed and non-judgmental as every student moves at his or her own pace. The woman in front of me seems to be moving through sun salutation at light speed, and the man to my right moves like a turtle, sinking deeply into each pose and sometimes staying there for three or four breaths before moving on. Sierra encourages everyone go at whatever pace they feel fits them at the moment, with no judgment.

"The class seems even more at ease with the good humor and personal approach that Sierra takes to teaching the class."

At one point Sierra leads us through a flow in which we lower our chin to the floor and go up into down-dog. He smiles and sarcastically calls it "Judy's favorite," to which Judy Russell, a four-year patron of ADK Yoga, laughs. They both inform me that Russell isn't particularly fond of these poses. Even so, she good-humoredly attempts to do them.

"How does it feel, Judy?" Sierra asks halfway through the second round.

"Joyful," Judy replies laughingly. Everyone in the room laughs at her sarcastic remark, and Sierra assures me humorously that he did not pay her to say that. The class seems even more at ease with the good humor and personal approach that Sierra takes to teaching the class, making us feel like we are a part of a fun, yoga family that doesn't take itself too seriously.

Nobody seems to be breaking a sweat or struggling with any of the poses as the ceiling fans whir quietly overhead, but my body feels energized and elongated after the first half hour.

Soon, we lie down on the mats and calmly stretch our legs out and then relax in child's pose. We lie down flat on our backs, and Sierra slowly takes us through each part of our body again, from feet to head, relaxing each and every muscle. We lie there silently paying attention to our breath for several minutes together.

I'm not sure what time it is – time seems to have lost meaning for a bit – but probably about five minutes before the class ends at 6:15 p.m., we sit up comfortably again and Sierra brings us back to our minds' original intentions for the class. He asks us to quietly meditate on that intention again, beginning at the sound of the bell. He dings the copper-colored bowl at the front of the room, and we disappear into our minds.

When it is time to return to the present moment, I look at the clock for the first time since I arrived. At 6:15 p.m., the class finishes right on time, and the students leave even more joyfully and peacefully than they were when arriving to the sunlit studio.

The students

According to Sierra, yoga is for anyone of any age and background. One of his long-time students, Will Breyette, 17, began taking yoga classes at ADK Yoga at thirteen years old after having surgery, which left adhesions on his abdomen.

"Will stuck with it and now he is a dynamic yogi," Sierra says.

Judy Russell of Plattsburgh (the "joyful" woman) has also been enjoying yoga with Sierra and Yokum for four years.

"When I first started some of the exercises were painful for me, but Luis adapted the poses so that I could do them without feeling like I had to keep up with anyone," Russell says.

Margaret Drobnik, another Plattsburgh resident, has been taking yoga classes with the couple for ten years, she says, and would never give it up.

"I began doing yoga because I was starting to feel creaky from old age," Drobnik says. "I was never much of an athlete, but I can do yoga and it makes so much of a difference. I have taken yoga classes other places, too, so I know this is a good place. I don't think I could still garden without these classes. Yoga is the last thing I would give up – I'd give up gardening and going to the gym long before I give up these classes."

APN gives ADK Yoga a 5 out of 5.

All Points North Fall 2011 (online magazine)
<http://www.apnmag.com/fall2011/subpages/bonanno/yoga.html>