

New Life From The ASH

Massapequa resident finds purpose, focus in Bikram yoga

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The importance of taking care of one's mental health has been a frequently discussed subject recently following the two high-profile suicides of Anthony Bourdain and Kate Spade. Suicide rates have increased in almost every state within the last decade and amongst all age groups, yet there has also been increased discussion in changing the culture.

Kelee Zaccardi, founder of Ash Hot Yoga in Babylon, found herself experiencing symptoms of depression that have become all too familiar about six years ago. Even with a successful career at a New York City IT firm, a healthy lifestyle with frequent intense workouts and a family, the Massapequa resident did not feel satisfied.

"I had everything, everything was supposed to be good, but I was just really, really depressed," she said. "You really convince yourself that you'd be better off not even being here. It gets to 'How did I end up with this life? I don't want this life.'"

At a certain point during this state, Zaccardi remembered the advice of her late friend, Samantha.

"She told me all these wonderful things that hot yoga did for her mentally and physically," said Zaccardi, who at the time brushed it off as nothing more than an obsession, opting for Crossfit and 10K runs instead. "I have [other] things that I do and I don't need to go in a hot room for it."

One day on a spur of the moment decision, Zaccardi took her friend's advice when she came across a hot yoga studio. She did not expect the outcome of what she thought would be an easy workout day.

"I thought to myself, 'I'll go here and nobody will know me, I'll just stretch, it'll be easy and that'll be it,'" she said. "I went in and it was an extremely difficult class. It's the hardest thing I've done in my entire life."

At the advice of her instructors, Zaccardi tried a few more classes over the next few months before becoming completely immersed in the culture.

"One day I woke up and went from being

absolutely at the bottom to the next day everything is fine; I always tell people that yoga finds you. I didn't try it after researching it, I just tried it," she said. "I thought 'Wow, I didn't do anything except this yoga' and that's when I got more and more interested in trying to figure how this all works and what happens."

That is when she knew she wanted to teach. Within two years she quit her job to begin Bikram training in India. When she returned, she began teaching at several studios, however, ran into difficulties with the methods being taught at the limited number of studios on Long Island.

"I would spend all my time driving around just to teach one class here and there which was really exhausting," Zaccardi said. "When I went to other studios to practice, they weren't doing it the right way."

Zaccardi's "right way" to practicing Bikram is

found in every personal touch she added to the studio she opened in 2017. The name stands for Awaken Your Mind, Strengthen Your Soul and Heal Your Body, which her students accomplish using a specific sequence of postures in a controlled environment which includes a one-of-a-kind antibacterial heating system that cleans itself. The classes feature a series of 26 postures and two

breathing exercises. The focus is on one posture at a time, held for a few seconds and then released, followed by a rest before heading into the next posture.

Despite the work it takes to do the practice of Bikram correctly, Zaccardi says it never feels like a job and is frequently receiving messages of how her classes have changed the lives of her students with weight loss, disappearing arthritis, lower asthma and a better mindset. Her lessons emphasize the importance of "me time" which is important for getting comfortable with Bikram.

"Everybody is so busy and since Bikram is a 90-minute class, the first thing you think is 'I don't have 90 minutes out of my day to do that,'" she said. "What people don't realize is that once you come into the studio and make that time you learn so much more. You don't have your phone or any access to the outside world but for that 90 minutes you just find yourself."

By putting aside time for one's self, Zaccardi's



Kelee Zaccardi (left) and yoga student Tonimarie

students get more out of her classes than they planned.

"You have to somehow fit it in and get that me time and then everything else kind of falls into place," she said. "If you can't do that you're going to get in more trouble."

At the studio, the students have several unique opportunities for "me time" with classes like Hot Pilates, Vinyasa and a hot barre yoga class known as "Torch," the only one of its kind in New York. Zaccardi, however, will always find Bikram the most beneficial both physically and mentally.

"You have to face yourself for 90 minutes every day and watch yourself sweat and your imperfections and over time you just get deeper into your meditation and your imperfections aren't imperfections anymore; you just appreciate everything," she said.

According to Zaccardi, the challenge of getting into Bikram yoga is surviving the first class.

"You can stay on your mat and there are no judgments," she said. "The teacher will give you their word. The only goal for your first class is to stay in the room."

Zaccardi assures the outcome will be worth it and within a few years, the medical world will be seeing the transformative results that causes meditation to rewire the brain.

"You're happy, you're healthy, you're present and you just appreciate everything," she said. "My goal is to keep spreading it and for people to know it's here. Whatever you're going through, you don't have to tell, just come to the room, come to your mat and try it."

“You're happy, you're healthy, you're present and you just appreciate everything.”
—Kelee Zaccardi



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