

Safe haven

A teacher in San Francisco helps homeless families find a reprieve and even a path to a better life. By Karen Macklin

AS A TEEN GROWING UP in the Washington, DC, area in the 1980s, yoga teacher Kate Holcombe remembers seeing the homeless population suddenly increase. Changes in federal funding for low-income housing and services for the mentally ill meant more people living on the street. Holcombe often shared food and conversation with the people she met. "It didn't seem right to me that people would walk by them on the street and ignore them," says Holcombe. "These were human beings in need."

That experience was one of the motivations that led her to study social work in college and, after training in therapeutic yoga, to launch her service organization, the Healing Yoga Foundation, in 2006 in San Francisco, to share yoga with people in need, including veterans, low-income kids, and cancer patients. Since 2006, Holcombe has held weekly classes for the homeless, reaching about 60 families a year, at Compass Family Services, a nonprofit helping families get off the street.

While food and shelter obviously come first for a person without a home, yoga practice is a valuable complement to traditional services, Holcombe says. Living and sleeping on the streets causes high levels of anxiety and depression, as well as physical woes like back pain and insomnia. Yoga helps people to manage their mental state and physical health, and can thus empower them to make lasting changes in their lives, such as taking steps to find permanent housing or seek help for addictions.

At her weekly classes, she teaches poses, breathing practices, visualization, and deep relaxation. Yoga class is a place where her students feel safe enough to relax, she says,



Kate Holcombe teaches weekly classes for homeless parents and children in San Francisco.

and from that calm state, make better life choices. For homeless parents in particular, wracked by fears about their children's safety, yoga's calming techniques can be invaluable. One of Holcombe's students, a young father of an infant daughter, was

trying to recover from heroin addiction and find housing and work. When he finally got a phone interview for a job, he asked the employer to call him just after yoga class because that's when he felt most centered.

"The yoga philosophy teaches us that there's a witness or light at our core that is pure, perfect, and unchanging," Holcombe says. Understanding this, she says, can help students realize they're not defined by their tough circumstances, and give them confidence to take steps to improve their lives.

Holcombe often lends a hand with childcare during her classes so parents can have a moment of calm. "When the parents feel more attuned to themselves, they're better able to care for their kids," she says. "And if the kids in our society feel more connected and loved, it helps us all."

Serve the homeless

If you'd like to donate or volunteer, several groups nationwide, including these, offer yoga to the homeless:

Washington, DC Miriam's Kitchen
miriamskitchen.org

Los Angeles Ama Yoga amayoga.org

Atlanta Centering Youth
centeringyouth.org

Portland, OR Street Yoga streetyoga.org