

GERGEN & VANOUREK: Yoga cultivates community

Christopher Gergen and Gregg Vanourek
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In her 20s, **Kimberly Wilson** found herself at the convergence of two big social trends. The first? Social isolation. The first nationally representative survey on this topic in two decades, conducted by Duke University researchers, found a significant trend toward increasing social isolation between 1985 and 2004, likely caused by such factors as an increase in time spent at work and the geographic scattering of family members. The second? The rise of yoga as a cultural phenomenon. The practice has been growing like wildfire. Americans annually spend an estimated \$5.7 billion on yoga classes and products, with 15.8 million people practicing yoga, according to the latest

"Yoga in America" study.

Miss Wilson, who was working as a paralegal in the District, took up yoga to handle the stress and immediately was drawn to its elegant combination of harmony, health and balance. Soon afterward — in a new job helping run the paralegal program at Georgetown University — she opened a yoga "studio" in her living room. Adding her own flourishes, she began classes with dedication and offered aromatherapy, inspirational readings, tea and cookies to create an inviting atmosphere.

Before she knew it, she was teaching 10 classes a week on top of her 40-hour workweeks. When Miss Wilson returned from a two-week yoga-instructor training course, she knew she was at a crossroads: "When I came back to my job," she remembers, "I cried. I realized this is not me. ... I was killing my soul. ... So I quit." Meanwhile, as an alert and budding entrepreneur, Miss Wilson observed hordes of young professionals living in the District who, like her, were working themselves to death and yearning for a sense of community. Creatively meeting this need, she envisioned a warm and thriving yoga studio that would heal stressed-out bodies while nurturing lonely souls. Embedded in that vision was a sense of adventure and a new life for her, draped with her own style and flair.

Her emerging dream was intoxicating but scary.

"I was kind of panic-stricken," she recalls, "with emotions ranging from being terrified ... to total excitement." Still, she went for it — and then reveled as her dream took flight and soared into something much bigger.

Today, Miss Wilson leads a hip yoga enterprise called Tranquil Space in the metro area, with studios in Dupont Circle, Arlington and Bethesda that serve more than 1,200 people each week. She recently outgrew her Dupont location and built out a new eco-friendly studio that spans three floors, including a new showroom for the TranquilT "eco-luxe lifestyle" clothing line she designs and a spa.

She runs the business and its spinoff nonprofit, the Tranquil Space Foundation, which focuses on empowering young women, and has written a book, "Hip Tranquil Chick: A Guide to Life on and off the Yoga Mat." Besides all that, she gets to do what she loves every day: build a community of people who share similar passions and values, and help them find renewal amid their otherwise frenetic lives. Miss Wilson is writing another book — "Tranquilista: A Girl-on-the-Go's Guide to a Mindfully Extravagant Life" — and does a column, blog and podcast on the yoga lifestyle.

Looking back, Miss Wilson notes that starting her own business was "a huge reflection of becoming more self-confident. ... It is very empowering to feel like I could create my own reality."

What does she tell the young women she mentors through the foundation? "Chart your own course. You have to wake up every day with yourself. ... [Y]our life is your art, and I am constantly working to create mine. My business is my passion. ... I get so excited talking about it and helping women realize that you can leave a loveless full-time job and create the life you desire."

Not a bad practice, especially if you're building an innovative new form of community, one yoga mat to another.

- Christopher Gergen and Gregg Vanourek are co-authors of "Life Entrepreneurs: Ordinary People Creating Extraordinary Lives" and founding partners of New Mountain Ventures, an entrepreneurial leadership-development company. They can be reached at authors@lifeentrepreneurs.com.