At Dorchester’s Brookview House, Yoga Fosters Growth

Once a week, the shelter turns into a yoga studio.

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by Jamie Ducharme

At 5:45 on a Tuesday evening, Dorchester’s Brookview House is a buzz of activity. Children chatter and play under the watchful eye of staff, engulfing long tables that cover much of the floor.

By 6 o’clock, the chaos is gone. The tables have been pushed aside, the kids ushered into a side room. Four women sit quietly on green yoga mats laid across the now-empty floor, ready to press pause.
Once a week, Brookview House—an apartment-style, long-term women’s and children’s shelter that focuses on building life skills and helping families get back on their feet—transforms into a yoga studio. It’s a program that President and CEO Deborah Hughes says allows Brookview’s 12 adult residents a much-needed respite.

“We try to bring in all kinds of methodologies that help women reduce their stress, and also do self-care, because they’re so focused on taking care of their children that they don’t take care of themselves,” Hughes says. “Yoga gives them the time to de-stress so they can take in the life skills training. It gives them the time to just breathe.”

The classes are taught by volunteer instructors from Hands to Heart Center, a nonprofit organization that brings free yoga to those who have faced trauma or adversity, traveling to community centers, schools, nonprofits, and other local organizations.

Brookview may not be a luxurious boutique studio—children’s voices float through the room throughout class, and the door’s buzzer occasionally punctures the quiet—but Hands to Heart is doing everything it can to obscure that. Sessions are gentle and soothing, with a priority on transforming a space. Savasana often includes aromatherapy and eye pillows, and practices offer participants a rare chance to slow down and rest.

Hughes says that unto itself is a rare gift for Brookview’s residents, most of whom are single mothers with multiple children, and many of whom are working to overcome domestic abuse, addiction, and mental health issues. But beyond that, the weekly yoga classes—which were added to the programming schedule based on resident requests—offer women a chance to stretch their boundaries.

“They requested it because it’s something you hear about, you see about, you read about, but they’ve never had the opportunity to experience it,” Hughes says. “What we try to help folks learn is to just try something new, try something different. We expose them to all kinds of different things.”

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