

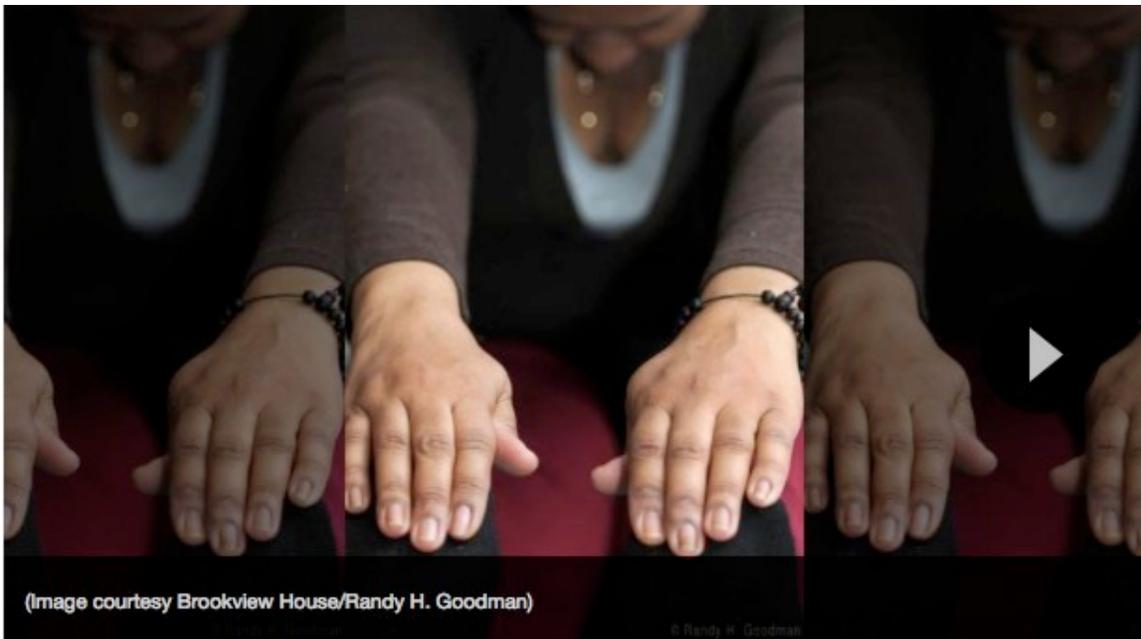
Mind and Body

## Boston non-profit offers free yoga classes for homeless

December 19, 2016

by Nicole Kwan

305,700,000 UMV



Two years ago, Carmen Bones, 39, moved with her two sons to an apartment provided at an affordable rate by Boston non-profit, Brookview House. Like many of the female residents—all of whom had previously been homeless or at risk of homelessness—Bones had been subject to domestic, verbal and financial abuse by her husband. Now, she takes regular yoga classes that Brookview provides free for residents.

“Yoga is awesome and helps us a lot,” Bones told FoxNews.com. “I’m so glad the [teachers] come here with us and that Brookview provides the kind of programs for us to keep busy.”

Since 1990, Brookview House, in the Dorchester neighborhood of Boston, has provided mothers and their children a safe place to live, as well as opportunities to learn new skills and build self-esteem. The 30 families live in one of two residential buildings or in apartments throughout the community. Next year, the organization hopes to open a third residence home with 12 more apartments.

“Our purpose is to break the cycle of homelessness, so we know that, unless we address all of their needs—their social-emotional needs, educational training needs, partnering needs, mental health and physical health needs—you’re just putting folks out into the world without skills to break the cycle,” Hughes said, adding that they were one of the first programs to work in this model, which has become increasingly popular.

After graduating from Brookview, 92 percent of moms maintain permanent housing and 88 percent of kids graduate high school—the national graduation rate for homeless students is 25 percent, Hughes noted.

Brookview’s programs include help with resume building, mock interviews for job training, and parenting classes, but the yoga classes, created in partnership with Boston-based Hands to Heart Center, are focused on helping the women’s mental, emotional and physical health.

“Yoga helps them become calm and centered and gives them the ability to focus on their goal,” Deborah Hughes, president and CEO, told FoxNews.com. “I think it has a calming influence on the community.”

Volunteer instructors from Hands to Heart Center, a non-profit that brings yoga to those affected by poverty and trauma, teach the adults hour-long classes once a week. After watching their moms in class, the kids wanted to learn and now have their own separate classes. The program started a year ago, with a six-week session, but residents asked for more and the program has run on a regular basis ever since. Classes are held in the facility’s youth room, which has calming colors and dimmable lights.

Domestic violence is part of the prior history of the majority of women who come through the program and addressing that trauma and long-term lack of attention to that type of trauma is important so they can move forward, Hughes said. Brookview found that most of the homeless families are homeless for long periods of time, which also leaves the women without a sense of ownership over their own bodies and lives.

For individuals who have been abused or traumatized, they likely want to disconnect from their bodies, and yoga can teach them to reintegrate and using the physical poses is part of that, said Dr. Maryanne Klatt, an associated clinical professor in family medicine at The Ohio State University Wexner Medical Center.

“One of the benefits is being able to trust your bodily reaction to things— your breathing rate increases when you’re anxious and is shallower. Unless you see the body-mind connection, you may not get that that’s an indicator,” Klatt, who is also a yoga instructor, told FoxNews.com, adding that yoga can teach the importance of being able to relax and being able to call upon that physiological response.

In addition to the physical movement, another method to enable this change is through diaphragmatic breathing, which activates the parasympathetic nervous system, which slows the heart rate. In her classes, Hands to Heart yoga instructor Anne DeSimone teaches simple breath work to the residents to allow them to observe what’s going on in their bodies.

“This is a class tailored toward women in that particular housing situation. The yoga class at its core is fundamentally like any other yoga class and the women really are fundamentally much like all other yoga students,” DeSimone told FoxNews.com. “There is a universality to yoga practice that I love, because you really can do it anywhere.”

While there can be a language barrier for those who don’t speak English as their primary language, DeSimone said she’s made connections with her Brookview students. Bones is grateful to the instructors who share their time and knowledge to the class.

“When we take yoga class, we feel calm, relaxed, and I enjoy it because [the instructor] gives the time to be her with us,” Bones said. “It’s so appreciated.” At first, the instructor taught the students about meditation with music, Bones recalled. After a couple weeks, she felt a difference in her body and said it may have even helped her lose weight. Now, Bones likes to meditate at home before she attends class with her housemates and then practices yoga with her boys, who are 3 and 12 years old.

Brookview House has clinical psychologists on staff, as well as graduate clinicians who serve a one-year practicum, which Klein noted was a strong example of truly integrative medicine.

“It’s both Eastern medicine and yoga, the non-traditional medicine,” Hughes said. “We combine the two in order to help the women increase their self-esteem. It also adds to their emotional and mental health needs.”

For Klatt, who is not affiliated with Brookview House, the program is a wonderful way to help women.

“One of the big benefits of yoga is understanding yourself and people don’t really talk about that. It’s taking away the veils of all those other things, like, ‘I’m a homeless woman’—that’s not all you are,” Klatt said. “Yoga at its core is supposed to help people see that they’re much more than their circumstances, their race, their economic status, their current situation.”

<http://www.foxnews.com/health/2016/12/19/boston-non-profit-offers-free-yoga-classes-for-homeless-women.html>