



PAMELA LEBLANC: FIT CITY

Yoga for the full of body

Instructor Abby Lentz knows what moves you can and cannot do with a larger body

Monday, February 27, 2006



Instructor Abby Lentz knows what moves you can and cannot do with a larger body. Lentz, in background, demonstrates correct exercise form for clients such as Babs Didner.

Most of the students in Abby Lentz's Tuesday evening yoga class can't contort like rubberbands or flex like delicate blades of grass. They're not lithe and wiry. They're big-bodied and full-figured, just like their instructor. And they feel less intimidated in a yoga class designed specifically for heavier people.

On a recent Tuesday evening, seven women and one man unroll their colorful mats and begin to stretch as Lentz queues up soothing music. Above them, puffy faux clouds and birds hang from the ceiling, part of a huge mobile in the waiting room of a Central Austin medical office, where the class takes place.

"I really want people to be able to do yoga and find all the benefits of yoga without the stress and pressure that heavy people often find," Lentz says. "I can tell in class — there's just a relief. People come there and it's all OK. The clothes they wear and the way they look just don't matter."

Lentz, 57, never talks about dieting or losing weight in her class; it's just yoga. She began offering the classes because she knows how it feels to be the heaviest person in a yoga class. She also knows that many overweight people would rather skip an exercise class than risk the humiliation of not being able to do what the instructor can. With her as instructor, she says, students can see how someone with a body like their own can do yoga.

"That's one of the advantages of having a full-bodied teacher — you can actually see her belly," Lentz says. "And just because I'm heavy doesn't mean I'm not strong and flexible."

Lentz has never been one to let her size stand in the way of what she does. In 2000 she walked the Dublin City Marathon in Ireland. She's finished the Danskin triathlon twice. She annually jumps into ice-cold water in Maryland as part of a polar bear swim fundraiser for the Special Olympics.

In 2004, the longtime yoga student became an instructor, phasing out a career in the technology publishing business. Now she teaches both traditional and heavyweight yoga classes at different locations around Austin.

She modifies poses for her heavysset students, and paces the class so they can get through it comfortably. Some poses, like inversions, shoulderstands and headstands, are off-limits. "There are lots of other ways to get the benefits of yoga without endangering yourself because of the body weight you carry," Lentz says.

She will lead the class through a series of poses and stretches, demonstrating technique and encouraging the students to ask questions. "Let the day go," she says, as class begins.

Flat on her back, one knee bent and the other straight, she calls out these toe positions: "Point, demi point, flex," then translates her instructions — "For those who don't know exactly what that means, it's ballet slippers, high heels, earth shoes."

As she guides the students through a hamstring press, she talks enthusiastically about the "sweet spot of discomfort," that tingly feeling that borders on pain. The students roll onto their sides, moving their legs in unison like windshield wipers, then rise up on their knees to form tables. As the class proceeds, they move into the downward dog position, then balance on one leg to create a tree.

"Keep the inner chatter supportive, nonjudgmental," Lentz encourages.

As class winds down, the students are on their backs again, their feet resting on chairs or benches. After a few minutes of silence, she thanks each one for coming and reminds them to drink water.

Connie Ryan, 52, a nurse practitioner and owner of Central Family Practice, where these classes are held, says she realized her middle-aged patients could benefit from the classes, and last fall invited Lentz to teach at the clinic.

"I felt it was something my patients and I needed," Ryan says. "As we get older, being flexible is important to staying healthy and to not falling and hurting yourself. It also helps with stress reduction, which is important in terms of cardiac disease prevention and life management."

The class offers a cradle of comfort, yet Lentz pushes her students' limits in an environment where they don't feel judged, Ryan says.

"It's really hard when someone who weighs 90 pounds and can bend like a pretzel is showing you the moves," Ryan says. "The main thing is to have someone who is fit and large and can show you how a body similar to yours could do a pose correctly and get what you're supposed to get from it."

"The cool thing about Abby is she just doesn't limit herself, and to have that modeled, to see a large woman who is an athlete, is really inspirational to me."

Other students agree. "I like the fact that it's taught by a large woman," says Babs Didner, 48. "Abby is an inspiration to me because she hasn't put her life on hold until she loses weight."

Other yoga teachers, she says, don't necessarily know what moves you can and cannot do with a larger body. In Lentz's class, they learn from example. And get some exercise while they are at it.

"It's something to see a pose you're striving for and see somebody large do that pose with ease," Lentz says. "You go, 'It's possible! It's really possible for me to do this.'"

HeavyWeight Yoga

When: 5:45 to 6:45 p.m. Tuesdays

Where: Central Family Practice, 801 W. 34th St.

Cost: \$12 a class-\$110 for 12 classes

Information: Abby Lentz also teaches traditional Kripalu yoga classes in her home in Northwest Austin and at Congregation Beth Israel. Call 258-4988 or 331-0480, e-mail abbyl@io.com or go to heartfeltyoga.com. Her classes are also available via streaming video at demandfitness.com.