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Forty-plus Years of Yoga Keeps Nonagenarian Nimble

By Katherine Rodeghier

"Yoga is a way of life," says Dorothy Johnson, and it's been a long life, indeed. The Clarendon Hills resident, who turned 93 at the end of February, has been practicing yoga for more than four decades.

"My husband died 45 years ago. I was very depressed. I needed something," says Dorothy. "My daughter decided she was going to yoga, so I went with her. First, I went once a week, then twice a week, and before I knew it, it was a way of life."

At the time, Dorothy worked at Marshall Field & Company and she would fit yoga into her schedule, taking classes at various park districts in the Western suburbs where her teacher, Kay Clay, was leading classes. Then Dorothy retired. "I began to go three, four, five times a week," she says. "My doctor asked me what I was doing because I was so healthy." Although she passed her driver's test, Dorothy decided to stop driving on her most recent birthday because she feels she can't turn her neck to look behind her as well as she used to. Now she relies on her yoga friends who have volunteered to take her two or three times a week to her yoga classes in Darien and Hinsdale. (When Kay Clay died in 2004, the yoga organization she had started in the 1960s continued as the Yoga Teachers' Group, Inc., with the teachers conducting classes in park districts, senior centers, corporations, and local churches.)



"If you continue yoga, it becomes easier and easier," Dorothy says. "Your body becomes more flexible." It's important to keep in shape as you get older, she says, and yoga helps. "I live in a seniors complex, and some of the women are younger than me, but they are incapacitated."

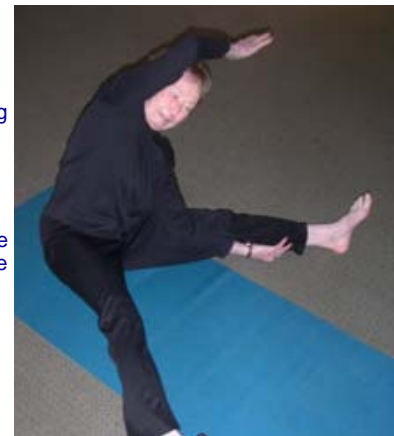
When she's not practicing yoga, Dorothy does needlecraft--counted cross-stitch mostly--and enjoys books. "I'm an avid reader," she says. She also walks a mile each morning to Mass, rising at five o'clock to be out the door by six.

Petite and slender, with bright eyes shining below her curly auburn locks, Dorothy is an inspiration to her fellow students and her teachers. She has become quite close to some of the other women in her yoga classes. "I've gained so many friends," she says over breakfast after a Friday morning class. "My yoga friends always keep track of me. When I'm not at yoga they will call and say, 'Are you OK?'"

Over the years, Dorothy has had to modify some of her poses. Her straddle stance is not as wide as it once was, and she may go into *balasana* (child's pose) when she feels she needs a break. She likes spinal twists and says her favorite pose is downward dog. Dorothy shrugs, "To me, it is a relaxing pose." The pose she finds most challenging is *chaturanga dandasana* (four-limbed staff pose)--especially moving from plank, to chaturanga dandasana, to a low cobra.

After a bone density test, Dorothy's doctor told her she had the bones of a 65-year-old. At 93, her health is good, although she has been hospitalized a few times over the years. Through it all, her yoga and her yoga friends have been there to support her.

For Dorothy, yoga is both a physical and a spiritual necessity.

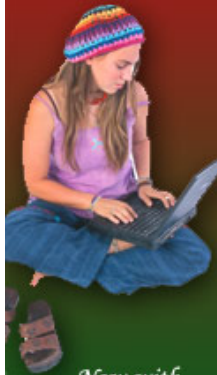


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"If I miss yoga, I don't feel good the whole day. Not physically," she says. "It's just that something is missing. Something just doesn't seem right. Then I remember, 'Oh, I didn't go to yoga today.'"

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Katherine Rodeghier is an independent writer and editor based in Western Springs, Illinois, whose work has appeared in a variety of publications, including the *Chicago Tribune* and *Midwest Living* magazine. She has been practicing yoga for more than six years and has been a student of the Yoga Teachers' Group since 2009.

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