

Imagine Yoga for EveryBODY



Wellness for All Abilities

Imagine Yoga and Wellness Inc., was started in 2018 by Robynn Nierop and Julie Burrows who have a combined 25 years of experience working with individuals of all abilities. Their business is based on the desire to provide options to encourage everybody to get more active and lead a healthier lifestyle in a fun and social way.

In an exclusive interview for ParaSport® magazine with ParaSport® Ontario's Executive Director Jeff Tiessen, here's what Robynn and Julie had to share.



JT: Julie, I understand that you began working with the special needs community when you were 18.

Julie: Yes, I started working at Community Living Toronto with a group at a golf course whose job was filling divots. So, all day long we filled divots. From there I supervised and supported another group that cleaned buildings. I got so much from that experience. I knew these guys for nine years and became one of the people they went to with concerns, relationship problems... the relationship we built was amazing.

JT: With a diversity of personalities, and demands, what did you take from that?

Julie: I learned how to work with people of all abilities. I met parents who needed respite support and that's when I decided to open Imag-

ine Respite Services to serve adults of all abilities, providing day programming, outings, activities, and at-home respite where I really started to learn about parents' different expectations.

JT: What about physical activity? Where did that rank on the priority scale for parents?

Julie: When I first started Imagine, our number one goal was socialization, not health, not physicality. I really just wanted to get these guys socializing and making new friends. Then Robynn joined Imagine and began to get some of our guys more active in the community... we'd go bowling or for walks, more physical things than they were used to. Robynn's goals were to put a healthy spin on Imagine Respite and from there we adopted yoga and health



and wellness. And so began Imagine Yoga & Wellness in keeping with the objectives of Imagine Respite Services and incorporating health and wellness.

JT: In the transition from socialization to healthy living, was there a defining moment that triggered you both to take the next step?

Robynn: We saw the ability and the empowerment and the want to have a better quality of life. It's been fascinating to see how it has evolved. We had our initial group of those with special needs and disabilities which now includes children and older adults. The special populations don't always have access. The most common question we get is "Where's your studio?" We don't have a studio. The idea is that we go to them to make it that much more accessible. Overall wellness encompasses the mind, body, and spirit. I think we can all agree that there is a shift in the demand, and necessity, for health and wellness and we like to work with the populations that may not have as much access to it.

JT: Does Imagine exclusively serve those with disabilities?

Julie: No. It was where we started since we already had Imagine Respite Services, but Imagine Yoga and Wellness also serves a broader scope of special populations. We want to provide health and wellness to whom-ever needs or wants it, with the idea that you don't have to come to us to get it; we'll come to you. So that's how



we transitioned from special needs to any special population and beyond.

JT: Do you accommodate different special populations differently or are your services generally the same for all?

Robynn: It varies. It's different when I am facilitating a class for individuals with special needs than it is for one for older adults, but the main goal is to make every classroom feel welcoming so no one is left behind. Everyone can practice within their means on any given day. When it comes to making it accessible, I may have someone in a chair and someone on a mat in the same class. It makes it more inclusive when you have varying degrees of physical and cognitive abilities practicing together. Yoga offers many modifications and the use of props are encouraged.

I adapt my yoga practice every day depending on where I'm at that day. How much you want to adapt it depends on the individual and their comfort level that day. Yoga itself is very adaptable. Show up as you are,

and we take you as you are. It will be whatever you make it out to be but we'll make sure you feel included and that you should be there.

JT: What's one of your biggest challenges in your business of yoga and wellness?

Julie: I think it's often parents, and sometimes teachers, of youth with special needs who don't see the benefit or don't believe that their child will benefit from it. It's getting this population as a whole to understand that they can do it regardless of ability.

JT: What are those benefits? What is that experience for someone? What are they coming away with?

Robynn: They're coming away with a deeper sense of relaxation. They're still getting a workout but it's much more relaxing. A lot of people aren't consciously breathing, so by utilizing breath and using it as a resource, it is hard to describe how far that takes people. It's about the way we move the body, holding poses, being present, and connecting with

our bodies. Many people are just disconnected for various reasons. Yoga allows you to rebuild that connection. A lot of people walk away from yoga having had an experience. We tell everyone that acceptance from outside helps allow their acceptance from inside themselves and to explore their bodies in ways they might not have through sport and other activities.

JT: Are youth able to embrace this philosophy as well?

Robynn: We offer yoga to children as young as two and a half years old! For the younger ones, we bring in puppets, animal poses, yoga-related story books and appropriate breathing techniques to make it more playful and relatable. They still get the benefits and the awareness. We are able to tell the story in a way that the audience can understand. With kids and some individuals with special needs, I try to be very mindful of language, making sure we use words that allow them to express themselves, and feel safe.



One great example of the outcome we wish to see involved a mother and son doing yoga together. Mom had concerns that her son was very “busy” and can be overwhelming because he’s so busy. She was looking for something calm. So I suggested yoga. At the end of the session she messaged us saying that she has never had her son so relaxed as she did after their yoga session and afterwards he had this new calmness to him.

JT: Would you call yoga an activity?

Robynn: I always call it a practice.

JT: For those parents who may be resistant or hesitant, what do you say to them?

Robynn: It’s the connection, with themselves and their body. It’s a healthy form of movement. It’s the potential for self-regulation and empowerment. Through the practice of yoga it invites everyone’s body to be accessible to them. Even those with

very limited, or even no movement, can do yoga by focusing on breathing. It can help you to relax and feel calm, to build connections and friendships, to increase confidence and to support the relationship you have with yourself.

JT: As advice to yoga colleagues, how do they get started, particularly if they don’t know anyone with a disability?

Robynn: You must start with an inclusive mindset. The accessible training that I did was life changing for me. It starts with being creative and understanding the need for it. Our goal is to have instructors all across the province making yoga accessible for all. I would like more yoga instructors to learn to be inclusive so all individuals feel accepted. There are many people with differences that need courage to enter a yoga room because they don’t feel welcome. We never want to do that.

JT: There is a segment of our community that believes it should be an instructor with a disability leading a class for persons with a disability because “the able-bodied community has never walked in our shoes.” How do you respond?

Robynn: To me it’s deeper than that. It comes from a place of sharing experiences. It’s about making yoga available. I don’t need to have to look, or be, a certain way to connect with someone in my class. We can connect even though we’re not the same. That’s inclusivity. It goes much further beyond what you see physically; we are all connected.

Regardless of ability or perceived disability, we are all in the yoga class together. We don’t presume to understand someone else’s journey in life. We’re seeking to create an experience.

To learn more visit www.imagineyogaandwellness.com.