

Newhouse: Yoga's calming influence on crime

By Dave Newhouse

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Teenager Genai Powers was set up perfectly for early self-destruction. There was no stopping her or even blaming her with the difficult odds she was given. With her parents incarcerated because of drugs, she drifted into drugs herself and was doing badly in school. Life became an undertow, pulling her downward into a sink-or-survive situation.

"I was dealing with a very intense family situation," she said. "I was really stressed out and depressed. I was falling asleep in class. I couldn't go to sleep at night. And I was (physically) fighting a lot with girls and boys." When all looked lost, she was rescued by Niroga, an Oakland-based nonprofit that teaches yoga, breathing techniques and meditation to troubled youth as an innovative approach toward reducing stress, intoxicants and crime numbers.

"I didn't know what yoga was, but I started doing it, and it helped me find myself and heal myself," said Powers. "I'm eating healthier. I noticed I can be positive. When I hang out with friends, and they're drinking or whatever they do, I'm not doing that anymore. I'm trying to help them change for the better too. "I feel a lot better about myself as a person. I love myself now."

Powers, now 17 and a Chabot College student, lives in Richmond. Powers envisions herself as a college graduate, singer, model and yoga teacher. She desires to help other youth, just as she was helped.

Which is welcome news, and further affirmation, of Bidyut K. Bose's concept that his Niroga Institute transforms lives.

"What a dysfunctional environment Genai came out of, and yet the lotus blooms out of being rooted in mud and dirt," said Bose. "We're giving kids hope and support through a transformative mentoring program. They've come to remove their tattoos. They want to get out of their gangs."

Bose, 54, is from India. "Niroga" is Sanskrit for "absence of disease." Bose was an unlikely candidate to become Niroga's founder and executive director after earning a doctorate in electrical engineering and computer science. But his childhood training in yoga and meditation in India remained with him. So after working 20 years in Silicon Valley, he started a seniors yoga class in Berkeley, where he lives, in the early 1990s. He launched Niroga in 2002.

Bose's staff of 28 yoga-students-turned-instructors teaches 100 Transformative Life Skills classes weekly in the Bay Area, serving 4,000 people annually. There are 70 classes per week for at-risk kids — 35 for incarcerated youth in East Bay juvenile halls and another 35 for low-income and delinquent youth in schools, alternative schools, homeless shelters and group homes.

"We measured two things to start out with — stress and self-control," said Bose, who strolls barefoot about his office at the First Congregational Church at 111 Fairmount Ave. "Researchers found out after a year that we could systematically lower stress and increase self-control in the individual through (yoga-induced) calmness and introspection."

But with the high number of youth-related homicides in Oakland and a recent television two-part series on gangs in Oakland, that task appears daunting. "My personal belief," said Bose, "is that each one of us has infinite potential to be reached and to be transformed. Every single one of us."

The Alameda County Juvenile Justice Center in San Leandro doesn't have recidivism numbers to show how many young people relapse after leaving its confines. That's because, Bose noted, they come and go and are hard to chart.

Judy Dunlap, Niroga's program director, brought up its new effort to "try to get minorities to learn to become yoga teachers, to bring it back out to the community. Right now, (yoga teachers) are white and blond females." That may be the perception, but Indira Allegra, Rachel Bolden-Kramer and Lucia Gonzales are minority yoga teachers at Niroga. Gonzales, who has a 4-year-old stepdaughter, Camille, from her husband's previous marriage and is expecting her first child, said the maximum-security males she teaches are "sweet and protective of me" because of her pregnant condition.

"We all are very loving and compassionate to the kids," she said. "Kindness, love and respect is something a lot of them have never experienced." Hayley Parlen, another yoga instructor, experienced Niroga's importance one day when a kid hurled invectives at another kid, who avoided a confrontation by focusing on his breathing exercises. Parlen then coaxed the instigator into practicing his breathing, thereby diffusing the situation.

"The success is huge," she said of Niroga's wide, calming influence.

Dave Newhouse's columns appear Mondays, Thursdays and Sundays, usually on the Metro page. Know any Good Neighbors? Phone 510-208-6466 or e-mail dnewhouse@bayareanewsgroup.com.