

The Story of Yoga North's Fifteen Years: A Fairy Tale of Sorts **by Drew Perry, Yoga North Partner**

Once upon a time, there were four lost and lonely yogis. They had no yoga home. Their last home had disappeared from under their feet and they wandered in the wilderness of a prairie city looking for places to practice together. Few studios existed, and none were Iyengar yoga studios.

Sometimes they would meet to practice together in the castle of the former Lord Mayor, Robert Steen, which had a Fireplace Room that the yogis would use once a month. Other yogis of the Iyengar persuasion heard about these secret gatherings and came one by one, two by two, until there was a small band of yogis who would meet.

Meetings were set up using the ancient technology of the day, the landline. Calls would be made to contacts late at night; messages would be left for the initiated: "Psst: Val will be teaching on Friday in the Fireplace room; bring your own mat; we have enough straps for everyone this week." Soon we needed more space and left the castle of Lord Mayor Robert, and found shelter at the home of the Holy Sisters: the large hall at the Misericordia Hospital (a name which appropriately comes from the Latin "merciful.")

Yes, the story of Yoga North is the stuff of legend. While there're weren't exactly princes and princesses in the story, there was a wise woman named Val and a band of merry helpers; sometimes a little bit of magic; and maybe a dragon or two. And there is a happy ending.

In the olden days, we met sporadically to practice because in the year after the closing of the only Iyengar home in Winnipeg in about 2000, a studio on Wall Street called Northern Lotus, Iyengar yogis had no home. In these temporary spaces we would take turns teaching or leading a class as some of us finished our interrupted apprenticeship.

I would often start the phone tree humming with a few calls saying that space had been found and booked. And then at the appointed time, yogis would miraculously materialize and practice together, sometimes not knowing each other. One person who always came but who said little and was notable for her perfectly straight headstands, held for the longest time. It turned out her name was Lisa Towson.

Another person found a little space on Osborne Street in a damp basement where a few classes were held each week. Her name was Laurie Ankenman. I taught a little bit there for her, and that's where I first met Andrea in a class.

Laurie was interested in finding a new space for a bigger studio. One day she drove by Augustine Church on River near Osborne and saw a for rent sign. She called Val and me, and Val knew Lisa was interested in having a studio someday. So the four of us began to meet and

dream and talk about possibilities. We developed budgets and mock schedules. Things came together, and the church was very open to having us use their basement space. It turned out I had helped host coffee houses in that very church basement in my teens, decorating the unfinished basement with cobwebs, fog and strobe lights. It was an unfinished space with a dirt floor, so there is a dungeon in the story. A yoga studio was a much better use for the now finished space.

The four of us became business “partners” – Val, our common teacher, Lisa, Laurie and me, and in homage to the previous yoga home for many of us, we called the new place Yoga North.

With a little bit of our own money and a lot of volunteer work, the space opened in the Fall of 2002, and old and new yogis came. We held some free classes to attract new people. At that time, there were just 6 or so yoga studios in the whole city, plus the usual yoga classes in fitness clubs and community centres. But after a few years at Augustine, there were 6 studios within several blocks of our space. The rise and fall of the yoga fad was rising again, with a hot wind blowing from the south, turning an ancient practice for self-healing and self-discovery into franchises.

After a few years of classes – even using two rooms at a time some days -- Laurie’s life changed directions and she decided to move to BC. Four partners became three. Laurie continues to teach yoga in the small towns of interior BC.

Janine had first met Lisa at a dance studio and had begun her yoga practice at Yoga North very near the beginning, and she came to work at the front desk and take control over both the front end and the back end of things. And most things in between.

We thought that after a few years of high rent in an area now overpopulated with yoga a move closer to where most of us lived would help. We found a space on Sherbrook Street and decided to move. Val decided that would be a good time to pull back her involvement and stop being a business partner. But we were happy that she kept up teacher training and teaching activities at Yoga North, but at a slower pace.

That left Lisa and me of the original four. We asked Janine to come on board as a partner and were excited that’s what she wanted too. Then after a few years at Sherbrook, Lisa’s life also changed and she and her family moved just outside of Dauphin, where she has a wonderful studio of her own called Tamarack Yoga.

And to continue the fairy tale story, there were a few dragons along the way, like the smoking lady at the Sherbrook space in the office beside the studio; she refused to stop smoking in her office even when caught red handed – she was a real fire breathing dragon whose fumes drifted into the studio during classes – including the Cancer Care class. Then there was a fiery

landlord dragon who refused to clean the bathrooms in the building. But it turned out he was really a shy dragon who was also afraid of the smoking lady dragon.

When the Sherbrook space became too big and too expensive, and just difficult on different levels, we went looking for another space, hopefully in the area. Janine and I were the two partners left, and we knew that the future of Yoga North needed the energy and commitment of other partners. We were excited when Andrea Erb and Regan Tataryn agreed to make changes in their lives and commit as partners to a revitalized Yoga North on Westminster.

Over the years we've had some milestones that we're proud of: Val convinced Lisa and I, and later Andrea and Regan, that we must go to India to study at the Iyengar Institute; it's fair to say that experience has changed all four of our lives for the better. The gift of BKS Iyengar and his family has made the world a better place.

And we were the first studio in Canada to host a brilliant teacher from the Iyengar Institute – Stephanie Quirk. We were also the first to host two of the top US teachers – Chris Saudek and Lois Steinberg - anywhere in Canada. Next spring we'll continue this tradition by hosting a respected teacher from the Iyengar Institute for a workshop here, Gulnaaz Dashti, as we coordinate with three other studios to create a cross-Canada tour for her.

And like all true fairy tales, there is a happy ending and there are some fairy godparents. We wouldn't be at this space on Westminster at all without the magic wand of Paul and Susanne Forsythe, who had so much faith in yoga and Yoga North that they created this new permanent home for us. They might be the prince and the princess of the story. We're so grateful to them.

And there can't be a yoga studio without yoga students. You have made all this possible. Your commitment over the years has been heart-warming and inspiring to us. BKS Iyengar said that "If your students come, be grateful you can teach them; if they don't come, be grateful you have time to practice." You came, and we've been truly blessed by your faith in this work.

And there wouldn't be Iyengar yoga in Winnipeg at all without the vision and commitment over all these years of the wise woman of the story – Val – who has personally trained every Iyengar teacher who's ever lived and taught in Winnipeg. She can be proud of her ongoing legacy.

And Regan has more to say about that legacy right now.

Thank you.