

Yoga in the County Youth Detention Center A Newbie's Teaching Experience

Buzzz.... With that, I pushed the button for access into the Santa Fe County Youth Detention Center, my first day teaching to kids at the Center. The guard opened the door and I handed over my sunglasses, keys and Driver's License before I wheeled my tubs of yoga gear any further.

Clank! A metal door slid open, and the guard and I walked through the door. Clank! It slammed shut behind us. I wheeled the tubs down a sterile pale blue cinder blocked hallway toward another metal door at the far end. Clank! The door opened and we walked into another cinder block hallway. Clank! It slammed shut. The guard directed me down another hall and into the cafeteria—long tables folded up against the bare cinder block walls, industrial tile floors and the lingering odor of food.

I open the tubs as the boys file in, accompanied by two guards. Each gets a mat and a blanket, and I attempt to have them set their mats out in the beginnings of a circle. As they are getting situated, a smaller group of girls comes in, accompanied by a guard. They get mats and blankets and form a small cluster on the opposite side of the room. After several iterations of putting out mats, we are finally arranged in a circle, myself included. The guards don't leave. They stand off to the side, a bit out of my line of sight, but their presence was obvious through the ongoing crackle of their radios.

I ask everyone to leave their slippers behind their mats and come to seated. The array of postures is not unlike those of any other teenagers I had taught in various high schools. Kids are kids, I think to myself. Then I ask them to close their eyes. None of them do. At that moment, I realize that these are not just your average teens. What happens if they close their eyes? Something not good, I imagine. So, I have 18 pairs of eyes staring back at me as I look around the circle. "Just take your gaze down to the floor in front of you", and all 18 heads shift slightly, gazes down.

After a few minutes of breath awareness, we shift over to hands and knees. "Take a glance between your legs and make sure you can't see your feet behind your knees". Oh wait, they can't see anything because of the baggy beige jumpsuits they're wearing! Another aha moment for me. We move with cat & cow, the kids watching me for visual cues and then I cue them into downward facing dog. They want to mimic my exact movements and crane their necks to see what I'm doing. I tell them to stay there while I get up so I can see. Some of the boys decide they aren't interested in participating and sit down. I ignore them and continue talking and moving the rest of the group through the practice. Eventually those sitting decide to join back in. We link breath and movement, with some half sun salutations and a few standing poses. It comes time to balance, and many of the kids are afraid to even try to lift one foot off the floor. "I can't do that!"

“Uh-uh, no way!”. I encourage them to fix their gaze, pay attention and try, just balancing on a big toe, tree variation, and a few of them actually come into the balance. We switch to the other side and more of them are able to do it. I offer “Nice job” to the group and see several smiles.

We come back to downward dog and I walk around the circle offering alignment suggestions, but being careful to avoid hands-on adjustment. I just don’t know how these kids might be affected by it. Suddenly something happens, and the male guards start walking slowly around the room, posturing and standing in different corners. The energy in the room changes palpably. I am very uncomfortable with this, but keep my focus on the kids. Eventually the guards return to their spots at the doorway. “Whatever that was, crisis averted,” I think.

I ask them to lay down and they do so, a bit unwillingly, with lots of discussion. The girls begin whispering and flopping about rather than follow my instruction. I remind them that yoga doesn’t require flapping gums, and the whispers stop. We move knees in and out a few times and then it’s time for stillness. I ask them to close their eyes, but expect that none will. Rather than leave them in silence here, I take them through a guided relaxation and leave just a minute in full silence. Then I bring them out and back up to seated. Several of them have amazed expressions on their faces. One of them says to me, “How does it work?” Another says he almost fell asleep and he never sleeps. One girl offers that she feels much more relaxed than she did when she came in.

As they file out, many make a point to say thank you. I thank them for participating and I think to myself, they’re teenagers, and they need this. And I’m thankful for the opportunity to share yoga with them.

Laura Vanderberg, ERYT500, YTh has been teaching group yoga classes for over 7 years. She has taught in her studio and in high school gyms, on youth backpacking trips and assorted other places where yoga is not traditionally taught. Volunteer teaching at the Santa Fe County Youth Detention Center has proved to be one of the most challenging classes she has ever taught, stretching her in surprising ways. She highly recommends working with at-risk populations who generally would not have access to yoga and its benefits.