

WRITTEN BY Jane Mekik
PHOTOGRAPHY BY Wanda Koch

Yoga in the Queen City

I think we can all finally agree that yoga is not a passing trend, yes? I know we've also moved on from the notion that it's a bunch of hippy-granola-unshaven-youths sitting around in strange positions while they breathe and chant their way towards who knows what. The perception of yoga, what it is, and who does it, has radically shifted in recent years (thanks Madonna & Gwyneth). In fact, if you don't already practice it yourself, you probably have a co-worker, friend, sister-in-law, or hair stylist who does. To better understand how this once exotic form of movement morphed from fringe to fad to a fundamental daily practice for more than 15 million Americans, we've tapped a handful of our favorite instructors in the Charlotte area to fill us in on why they do what they do.

In our humble opinion, no conversation of yoga in the Queen City can be had without mention of the lovely Grace Morales. Ask any teacher in town (and we asked a lot of them), and they likely will credit her for inspiring their love of the mat. Founder and former owner of Charlotte Yoga, the city's first Power Yoga studio, Grace pioneered the shift in public perception of the practice as 'easy,' or 'boring,' to 'challenging,' and 'exhilarating.' Her classes were set to a soundtrack of upbeat tunes with positive messages. She would deftly weave through her own personal experiences, somehow making each student feel connected and understood. And all the while, your body was being stretched, toned, rinsed and relaxed. Sound amazing? It was, and still is! While she's no longer

affiliated with a studio, Grace teaches workshops and leads several Teacher Trainings a year. We recently caught up with her to ask how her perspective of yoga and teaching has grown, and how she sees it continuing to unfold. This is what she had to share with us:

Grace Morales

yoga instructor, health advocate, pioneer
gracemorales.com

“In [my] first years as a teacher I immersed myself in understanding the philosophy, culture and language of yoga. I sought out teachers who were first generation to living master teachers. I will always be grateful to [them] and the time spent in this research, however I found I was losing my way...ironic since [yoga] is a system that brings you home to your true nature.

My first love in the whole process of finding yoga was health. I teach yoga because I believe it is a wonderful system to create health, but not the only



good system. These days I more often than not use English names of postures to make it less intimidating for new students. I care about the safety, strength and mobility of the joints, so whether it is a move I learned from Pilates, physical therapy or yoga, I will sequence it right into a class if it will add to the overall wellness of the student.”

Charlotte is blessed with a wealth of amazing yoga instructors.

We love this philosophy of yoga, taking it not as a static or regimented discipline, but one that continues to grow, evolve and improve right along with its instructors and students. Grace's dedication to health above all else (hint: it's not about how high you can get your leg or the size of your Lululemon pants), cements her as a continuing beacon of inspiration in the Charlotte yoga community.

But wait – there's more where that came from. Charlotte is blessed with a wealth of amazing yoga instructors. Following is a sampling of who they are, where they teach and what keeps them coming back to their mats. Enjoy.



Tanner Bazemore

Owner, instructor at Y2 Yoga
280 S. Sharon Amity Road
704.456.9642

Why do you practice yoga?

Sanity and my physical health; it makes me feel good.

Which yoga teacher has made the biggest impact on your life?

Grace Morales was my first teacher so she will always be dear to me. Johnna Smith opened me up to a whole new world of yoga: Ashtanga. And Michael Gannon was my first Ashtanga teacher, whom I very much respect. Then there is Ido Portal, my handstand coach, but he isn't a yogi.

What inspired you to teach?

Teaching to groups is more powerful than teaching to just one (I was a personal trainer), so I can have a greater impact on making people's lives better as a yoga teacher.

How has your practice evolved over the years?

I am much more open, obviously. I have a ways to go, but nothing but time to kill by practicing!

Three words that describe your classes:

Insane, challenging and hysterical!

Favorite pose!

Bound Half Moon! Who doesn't like a good Half Moon?

Suzanne Bergen

Instructor at Charlotte Yoga
1730 E. Woodlawn Road
704.665.9003

Why do you practice yoga?

Because I love it and all of its benefits. My mat is my sacred ground.

Which yoga teacher has had the biggest impact on your life?

Grace Morales.

What inspired you to teach?

I love watching the students change over time as their practice deepens.

How has your practice evolved over the years?

Lots of us come to yoga for the physical benefits. That was me at first. Now it is the breathing, spiritual and meditative aspects that draw me.

Three words that describe your classes:

Inspiring, strong and fun.

Favorite pose!

Utthita Trikonasana – Triangle.





Mara Healy

Instructor at Enlighten Yoga
9852 Rea Road
704.543.8000

Why do you practice Yoga?

I practice because I no longer have a choice of not practicing! It has shaped me to be who I am today and without it my life would cease to have the same quality. I found yoga as I was thrust into the hard work and chaos of raising three kids. I needed to be all things to all people while struggling with progressive degenerative spinal arthritis. It has helped me become less overwhelmed with the complexities of life.

Which yoga teacher has made the biggest impact on your life?

Grace Morales taught me to move my body skillfully while enjoying music,

my breath and her pearls of wisdom. Chandra Om gave me profound experiences of purification, yogic diet and serving God and the Divine through yoga. Andrey Lappa (creator of the Universal Yoga System), has given me teachings and practices that have made me realize the true depth and profundity of yoga.

What inspired you to teach?

I would never have been a teacher if someone at Charlotte Yoga (back in 2002) hadn't suggested that I enroll in teacher training. They saw something in me that I didn't see in myself. I have been super lucky to be surrounded by supportive, generous people who have provided me with opportunities to fail and then get back up and try again.

How has your practice evolved over the years?

I started with a physical practice, and that continues today. What has changed and evolved is that I have found my inner voice and my most authentic self.

Three words that describe your classes:

Authentic, balanced and creative.

Favorite pose!

Without a doubt...scorpion handstand!

Rian Harris

Instructor at Yoga One

1318 Central Avenue

704.332.9911

Why do you practice yoga?

I feel more of what my body is communicating to me, physically and emotionally. I enjoy the challenge and the results. I love being connected to genuine and authentic people that are bright and beautiful in every way.

Which yoga teacher has had the biggest impact on your life?

If I can only choose one, it would be Johnna Smith. She's so inspiring and challenging. She introduced me to ashtanga, chanting and pranayama,

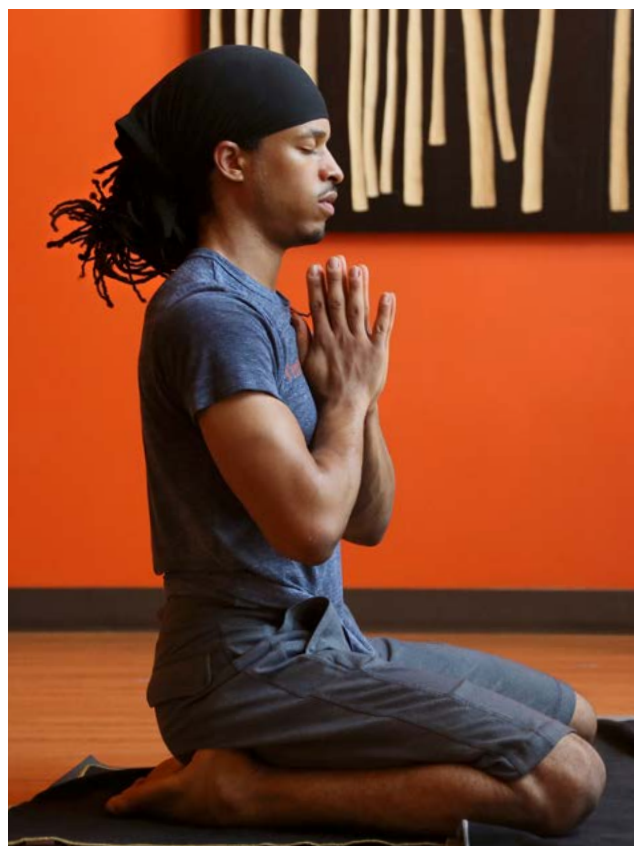
and she has influenced the way I approach teaching power vinyasa.

What inspired you to teach?

I saw the opportunity to share my life and my practice through teaching. I love being able to offer a different perspective on the practice of yoga, on and off of the mat. I also get to practice being more extroverted because that's been outside of my comfort zone for most of my life.

How has your practice evolved over the years?

It has become more refined. There's more hand and foot awareness and



attention to engagement and alignment in all things, including standing and sitting. There's more intention with the energy I put out there through my words, actions and thoughts.

Three words that describe your classes:
Challenging, inspiring and inquisitive.

Favorite pose!
Handstand

Hollace Stephenson

Instructor at Yoga Shala Charlotte
2205 Park Road
980.272.8730

Why do you practice yoga?

I practice because I feel great physically, mentally/emotionally and spiritually. Yoga eases the tension in my body and mind. Through yoga I feel a strong sense of peace and knowing that there's great power within me and supporting me.



Which yoga teacher has made the biggest impact on your life?

Yogarupa Rod Stryker. His experience, knowledge and dedication are supreme in the world we call yoga today and those are qualities I admire.

What inspired you to teach?

Even as a child I was lit with a fire to teach, so when I discovered I had a love of yoga, I was naturally drawn to teach it. After several years of practice I decided to first study Kripalu yoga. As my experience and knowledge grows I become more inspired to teach and spread the wisdom of yoga.

How has your practice evolved over the years?

My practice started out primarily on a physical level to gain strength, flexibility and balance. After discovering the depth and scope of yoga, my practice has evolved into a more purposeful energetic and meditative approach. I find it easier to reach a place of contentment and joy after strong asana practice that includes a powerful emphasis on pranayama, mantra and meditation.

Three words that describe your classes:

Full of energy.

Favorite pose!

Recently, twists for their balancing effects, and always siddhasana [easy seated pose] for the joy in doing nothing and feeling love.

Johnna Smith

International yoga instructor, workshops and training locally and worldwide
johnnayoga.com

Why do you practice yoga?

I'm more inclined to be calm and harmonious with the world around me. I meditate to be happy and practice on



my mat to stay healthy and fit. Basically, I practice yoga so I don't lose it when things don't go the way I imagined.

Which yoga teacher has made the biggest impact on your life?

The lovely and masterful Rod Stryker, founder of Para Yoga, has been my teacher since 2001. My life has changed so much for the better because of his lifetime commitment to share these ancient teachings.

What inspired you to teach?

My yoga practice began as a place to work out then it quickly turned into a practice of being non-reactive to stimuli. I really needed that! My lifelong plague of panic attacks went away shortly after I began yoga and meditation. I thought that if I could share these practices with just one other person who suffered

from stress and anxiety, it would be worth spending my life doing.

How has your practice evolved over the years?

My practice has been a mixture of ease, pain, peaks, valleys and plateaus. It's been a culmination of sweetness and incredible fun, ego-driven intensity and the place I can humbly bow to when life's "life-ing" me. It's now become part of the way I breathe.

Three words that describe your classes:

Uplift, inspire, connect.

Favorite pose!

Goodness, after breaking (the doctors called it "destroyed") my ankle six months ago, every single pose is my favorite right now.

So now that you've been introduced to some of Charlotte's best and brightest yogis, what are you waiting for? As Grace so wisely states, we can all benefit from a practice that helps keeps us "strong, flexible, happy and healthy." Check out a studio near you, and happy OM-ing! ■