

**Senior Yoga Partnership:
Milwaukee Yoga Center and Shorewood Senior Research Center
Meredith W. Watts**

[NOTE: For more photos of classes at the Milwaukee Yoga Center and the Shorewood Senior Research Center, see albums at *meredithwatts.com*]

The current partnership between the Milwaukee Yoga Center and the Shorewood Senior Research Center began some six years ago when SRC Director Elizabeth Price contacted the MYC to see if anyone might be interested in offering a gentle yoga class for seniors. Susan Goulet, Director of the MYC, suggested that Meredith Watts might be interested in starting a class.

Meredith is a certified instructor in the Iyengar tradition and was at the time offering both regular yoga classes and restorative classes that emphasized adaptations of traditional postures



(asanas) for practitioners of varying abilities and physical condition.

Since Meredith himself came to yoga later in life after retiring from university teaching, he had experience working in the Iyengar tradition with mature bodies.

Adaptive Postures for Mature Bodies

Since yoga for mature bodies has a long history in the Iyengar tradition, it was a natural base for developing classes at the Senior Research Center. There was a space available with



chairs, open walls and tables that could be used to modify and support postures. There were a few guidelines in this first class: No students are required to get down on the floor if they are not comfortable doing so, and alternative postures were adapted

with various forms of support to adapt them to the physical condition of virtually everyone.

Deepening the Partnership between the Senior Center and the Milwaukee Yoga Center

During the first several years of the project, Meredith taught a single class at the SRC. The Milwaukee Yoga Center deepened its involvement other MYC instructors began to substitute for Meredith from time to time. This extra support from the MYC made it possible to offer classes in the Milwaukee Yoga Center itself. With the generous and continuing support of Director Susan Goulet, the MYC contributes space for additional classes each week. These classes offer more opportunities for seniors, and let them experience a fully-equipped studio with even more options for adapting postures. MYC instructors Linda Murphy and Karen Chandler

now regularly support the classes along with Meredith. All instructors teach in the Iyengar tradition, which is ideally suited for dealing with physical limitations and the process of aging.

The seniors participating in the classes have the usual range of physical issues that people have, including some that seem to come with age. Common issues among participants are stiff or injured shoulders and other joints, carpal tunnel, arthritis, muscle and tendon difficulties, and problems of balance and general flexibility. This is not “therapeutic yoga,” but the careful adaptation of conventional yoga to accommodate a range of physical conditions. We believe that the mindful practice of adapted yoga, done with other active seniors, is itself a great benefit for the body and spirit.

We do ask participants to **consult with their regular doctors and other medical support** to make sure these classes are appropriate for them; once they have the green light from their health professionals we are delighted to have them work with MYC/SRC to increase their flexibility, balance, body awareness and concentration in a congenial environment of active seniors. Participants do not need to bring any equipment of their own and the fees are nominal. The Milwaukee Yoga Center is a fully-equipped studio, so participants do not need to bring mats or other equipment with them. No students are required to get down on the floor if they are not comfortable doing so (although many do, as the photo albums show); alternative postures using chairs and other support are always available. All postures use various forms of support to adapt them to the physical condition of virtually everyone. The SRC class on Tuesday has the same goals as the MYC classes, and works walls, chairs, tables and occasionally other props to modify postures. The photo albums at **meredithwwatts.com** show participants at the community center where participants do not get down on the floor and at the Milwaukee Yoga Center where many participants do choose to work on the floor for some postures.

Participants in Senior Yoga Talk about their Experience

Mike Drew, age 78, spent a distinguished career as writer for the Milwaukee Journal-Sentinel and continues to dedicate himself to writing, public service and, as he writes here, to an



active life of sports as well. He writes: “Yoga, I’ve discovered can help enable aging would-be athletes stay not only upright but somewhat competitive. Since I began working with ... Meredith Watts twice weekly through the Shorewood Senior Center at 78, I’ve not missed a day in my perpetual, often futile, quest to win

games: tennis, golf and sailboat racing. I’ve also managed to continue regular weight training, biking, swimming, walking and volunteer activities without the pesky muscle pulls and tears and joint issues that have benched me periodically in the past. If all of those activities aren’t fighting off senility (my goal), they surely are enhancing my quality of life -- partly because, as a bonus, Meredith adds lots of laughs to my day.”

Else Ankel (photo right), now 80, retired from a scientific career and is now active in



many areas, particularly when they have something to do with ecology. She offers this “Yoga Winter Story” as an example of how her physical training has helped her to

deal with normal, and not so normal, daily activities:

“I am an 80 year old woman and I live in an old farm house on the Upper Eastside of Milwaukee. My car is a 15 year old hatchback with two doors and a stick shift. The car lives on the street because the old farmhouse has neither a garage nor a driveway.

It was a cold winter day in January I needed to run an errand at a place too far away to walk to. The city plows had pushed lots of snow onto the driver’s side of the cars parked on the street. I did some serious thinking and then I shoveled the snow off the left car door and tried to turn the car key to open the door. It didn’t work, the lock was frozen. I removed the snow from the right door, tried to open the door. It didn’t work, this lock was frozen too.

I shoveled snow from the hatchback and tried to open the hatchback door. Hurrah - this lock was not frozen.

I opened the back door, pushed down the two back seats, crawled in on all fours to the right front seat to open the right door from the inside. It did not open.

I crawled over the stick shift to the driver’s seat to open the left door. It did not open.

I was almost ready to give up and crawl back out again. Last try: I turned on the heater and waited for 5 minutes. Hurrah, the left door thawed up and opened from the inside.

I went out to close the hatchback and tried to open the right door. Another hurrah - this door opened too.

I wiggled the car back and forth in the snow and finally out to the street and off we went.

I could just imagine what some neighbors who saw me were thinking, something like “this old lady is really crazy to crawl into the back of her car”. But what they didn’t know is that this old lady is not crazy at all. This old lady is smart, and she is taking two yoga classes a week at the Milwaukee Yoga Center that keep her in good shape. This old lady has just saved herself

some taxi money because she is flexible enough to crawl into her hatch back car from the back and over the stick shift to get the ignition started and the car door locks thawed from the inside.

With many thanks to my yoga teachers Meredith and Karen from Else Ankel.”

Milwaukee/Shorewood senior yoga has many stories of participants who felt better prepared for medical procedures, or felt their recovery was smoother and faster, or who simply feel they are in better mental and physical shape for their daily activities. Perhaps not all will improve their “serve and volley” tennis game like Mike, or better negotiate the hardships of the Midwestern winter like Else, but most feel an improvement in their balance, strength and flexibility. At the very least, it is a productive way to spend an hour or two a week with active, vibrant people who are determined to make the most of their mature years.

[Note: A revised version of this article appeared in the Milwaukee Yoga Center Newsletter]