

POSED FOR SUCCESS: Special Education teacher Mary Flynn says yoga has many benefits for her students

By Bonnie Delaney, Staff Writer

At exactly 11:25 AM, Mary Flynn dimmed the lights in her classroom at Central Regional High School in Berkeley. Her students unrolled their rubber yoga mats, took off their shoes and socks and assumed the cross-legged seated pose.

Peaceful music with tinkling chimes filled the room and class began.

“Sit up high on your sit bones. Shoulders back and down and allow your eyes to close shut,” she instructed in a low, soothing voice. Now inhale and exhale, taking a moment to set and intention for yourself – joy, peace, maybe gratitude, perhaps patience,” she suggested.

Flynn, a special education teacher for the past 29 years, brought what she has dubbed the “Yoga for Life” program to her classroom this fall after the district’s occupational therapist Jennifer Perillo and physical therapist Eileen Clemente shared information with her about an intensive, two-day workshop they had taken called “Yoga Therapy for the Child With Developmental Challenges.”

Flynn, who began training to become a registered yoga teacher in June, said she took the workshop in October and was “so excited about it that she knew she wanted to introduce her students to the benefits of yoga.

“I immediately bought yoga mats for everyone in my class (to match their personalities) and designed an appropriate sequence to meet the needs of my students,” she said during a class recently, adding that occupational therapist Jenn Perillo assisted as a technical advisor.

“Yoga therapy addresses a wide range of developmental goals, including motor, sensory, emotional, social, psychological, perceptual and immune. Yoga assists children in developing a sense of internal control – positively impacting their need to feel safe, (their) interactions with others and the ability to reduce stress,” Flynn explained. “Regulating and synchronizing the breath with the body results in a child being able to move from survival mode to developing self-awareness, self-control and emotional safety,” she said.

Sean Gray, 17, of Seaside heights, placed his mat next to Flynn’s, as he sat in cross-legged position, carefully mimicking her movements. “I like yoga. It makes me feel happy when I do it. It makes me feel calm,” he said.

Singing chants (in English) are a part of the yoga class, as are breathing exercises and making funny noises, like “Heeee,” while exhaling. That particular exercise caused several students to break into smiles and some, including Nicole Tideschi, 19, of Berkeley to chuckle.

Taylor Eccles, a 15-year-old sophomore from Seaside Park, is one of the high school students who assists as a student aide in Flynn’s classroom. “I want to study child development and hope to have my own day care center when I’m out of school,” Eccles said.

Lee Mac, 15, of Berkeley, who is also a sophomore, said she plans to become a nurse and work with special-needs student. “This is my first year helping, and it’s a good feeling working with the students. Plus, it’s yoga, and it’s fun,” said Sarah Fuentes, a 16-year-old from Berkeley.

Flynn said other students have also assisted the program – including Home Economics students who sewed eye pillows for deep relaxation and weighted beanbags used for breathing exercises.

“I would love to see my students have the opportunity to continue to practice yoga for their own self-fulfillment – to be able to take yoga classes in their own community.” She said.

“In the short time we’ve been practicing, I’ve seen tremendous awareness and progress in many areas. My students look forward to the class. Each day my students and student-aides prepare the environment for yoga class by clearing the space, lining up their shoes and socks, placing their mats and props in a neat, orderly fashion and wait quietly in “easy pose” or savasana for class to begin,” she said.