

## Final Report: Yoga for the Homeless

All my life I have had a heart for those experiencing poverty and marginalization. This, along with my passion for medicine, sparked my interest in the Albert Schweitzer Fellowship. As a future osteopathic physician, I took particular interest in addressing the multiple facets of health: mind, body, and soul. As an avid yogi, I know that yoga practice touches each of these aspects. Through ample research and personal experience, I realized the homeless community in Detroit was severely lacking in any extracurricular activities, let alone, an endeavor to enhance their health. The need for such an activity was too great to dismiss. Thus, I made the decision to pursue the implementation of a yoga program specifically for individuals experiencing homelessness in the city of Detroit.

At that time, I was volunteering with Detroit Street Care (DSC) through my school, Michigan State University College of Osteopathic Medicine (MSUCOM). DSC hosts a clinic at the Neighborhood Service Organization's (NSO) Tumaini Center in Detroit. The Tumaini Center is a shelter for those experiencing homelessness. It encompasses two large rooms with chairs and a few televisions, not much else. From working at the Tumaini Center I was able to engage with those who stayed regularly there. I discovered that unless they have a job, most men and women sit in the chairs all day with little to do. Implementing a yoga program at the center would fill a need for health and wellness, as well as a need for an activity to break up the day.

Through my volunteering with DSC, I became acquainted with Dean Carpenter, the nurse practitioner, and for all intents and purposes, head of all things medical at the Tumaini Center. I approached him about my idea and he immediately showed interest in it. He believed it would take off quickly and was excited to use the center's beautiful outdoor space for the program. Because of Dean's reputation and experience at the center, I asked him to be my mentor in implementing the yoga program, and he happily obliged. Once I was accepted into the fellowship, I immediately got to work with establishing goals for my program. Ultimately the goal was to make an impact. I desired to see the

beneficial effects of yoga on both mental and physical health. However, to make that impact, I had four other goals I planned to tackle: logistics, the class, improvement, and sustainability.

The goal for logistics was all about setting up for success in both the fellowship and the actual program. I needed to first gauge the people at the NSO Tumaini Center to ensure they were interested in yoga and to establish the best day and time that would work for participants. I needed to obtain the necessary supplies for the class (mats, blocks, snacks, etc.). I also needed to obtain an IRB as a fellowship requirement. Lastly, I needed to work through the ins-and-outs of how the class would run and how to evaluate it.

Tackling the class goal was more about action than administration. Running a yoga class for individuals that may be unfamiliar with the practice presented its own challenges. I needed to ensure I was explaining positions clearly and that every move was doable for the multiple ages and comorbidities within the population. This still encompassed some administration work as I needed to research poses thoroughly and compile multiple yoga flows.

The goal of improvement entailed deciding how to receive input and then apply that information to enhance the classes. The fellowship required some form of evaluation of the program, as did the IRB, which I would use as a tool to reach this goal. Regular evaluation in combination with a dynamic program would allow for the classes to perpetually improve and draw in more participants.

The last goal of sustainability is what every Schweitzer fellow hopes to accomplish with their program. Yes, we all want to impact our populations' health and well-being in a positive way, but what sets the Schweitzer fellowship a step ahead of all other altruistic endeavors is that, ultimately, these programs are set up to continue when the fellowship is over. To be quite frank, I knew little to nothing about sustaining a new program. I planned to lean on the fellowship for guidance on this matter, in hopes that our monthly meetings with various speakers would help organize a finalized plan to execute

this. These goals may seem simple and straightforward, but I never could have anticipated the number of roadblocks (or “boulders,” as we call them at the fellowship) that would occur.

Initially, my program started off strong. I immediately jumped in, eager to start my project and make a difference. Wide-eyed and bushy-tailed is how I would describe myself at the time. My faculty mentor was Dr. Richard Bryce from MSUCOM, who also happened to be in charge of DSC. With his help, I participated in clinics with DSC at the Tumaini Center and was able to ask patients questions in regard to the program. I inquired about how often they were at the Tumaini Center and if implementing a yoga program there would be welcomed. I also was able to discuss what days and time would be best for the class to take place. I received positive feedback that the program would be more than welcomed (especially if I brought snacks for participants). During this time, I also set up a GoFundMe account and received donations from many friends on Facebook to purchase yoga supplies. I raised a little over \$300. With these funds I was able to purchase the necessities for the class such as mat cleaning supplies and snacks. I also received physical donations of yoga mats, blocks, bolsters, and straps from those who wanted to give in a non-monetary way.

With such a strong start to accomplishing my goals, I was overly optimistic about the future of my yoga classes when I hit my first boulder. In June, I was taking my first set of medical board exams. While I had anticipated to keep up the pace with my program, it proved near impossible to do anything else but eat, sleep, and study. I had both my MD and DO boards to take, which much of my future career as a physician lay hinged upon. Thankfully, I did well on my boards and was ready to get back to the task at hand in July.

The next step was my IRB, unfortunately. I say unfortunately because the IRB proved itself to be another boulder to my program. I had never written an IRB and had to arrange to meet with Dr. Custer to discuss the proper procedure. I found out I needed to submit the exact evaluation I wanted to use to assess the effectiveness of my program. The task required research into validated surveys. I searched

among questionnaires looking for simplistic wording for the participants with questions that could truly evaluate the program accurately. It took me three weeks to finish my IRB. The process may have been prolonged from my perfectionist mentality; always having to quadruple check things before I submit them. After all, an internal review board sounds like a pretty serious thing, and I did not want to be denied my project. In the end, it was a moot point as the IRB returned with their answer: an IRB was not required because this was deemed a program evaluation.

Once the IRB hurdle was successfully jumped, I moved to initiating my classes. I was beyond excited to get things moving and actually start yoga with these men and women. Little did I know, the biggest boulder yet was waiting for me. I was given the go-ahead to begin my classes and immediately reached out to my site mentor, Dean. He was my one and only contact to get my program into the Tumaini center. Dean never replied to my initial email, so I sent another email that week. Again, no reply. I sent another email the following week, no response. I began sending emails two to three times weekly with no avail. He had previously sent me the days he worked at the center, so I even took the liberty and drove there during one of his shifts only to find that he was not there. I was able to obtain his phone number (we had previously only corresponded in person or via email), which I called and left a voicemail. I never received a response. After three weeks of feeling “ghosted,” I reached out to Dr. Bryce to ask if he knew how I could contact Dean to start my classes. This is when I got the most unexpected news: Dean Carpenter had passed away.

It was difficult news to say the least. While my project was on hold and seemed improbable at this point, I also was grieved that Dean had passed. He was a light to so many people and truly made a difference in the homeless community. He committed his life to serving those less fortunate and was a role model for me, as I want the same for my future. It was shortly after hearing this tragic news that I reached out to Dennis to resign from the fellowship.

I worked through the hour calculations and the innumerable obstacles that lie ahead in establishing another site mentor while also beginning the program in a timely manner. It all seemed too much. I felt I could not continue this project successfully given the standards of the fellowship. This was possibly the lowest point for me. I had gone from a strong start to a complete halt. I was at a loss for how to make up the missed time, while also taking an enormous step backwards. Dennis responded to my email with much more hope than I was feeling at the moment. He told me to wait on withdrawing from the fellowship. He believed I could still continue my project and make up the hours in due time.

Dennis reached out to Linda Little, the CEO of the NSO, who in turn reached out to me. Ms. Little and I played phone tag for some time (getting a hold of the CEO of a company proved as difficult as it sounds). Eventually, we were able to correspond via email. Ms. Little was excited about my project and thought it was a great idea, but not at the Tuminani center. She believed my project was better suited at the NSO Bell Building in Detroit. I had never been to the Bell Building, but since she was the CEO, she got to call the shots. I obliged and had to further contact administration at the Bell Building to initiate my classes. I ended up speaking with a Ms. Pamela Bracy, and she became my key contact for the Bell Building after that.

Ms. Pam was able to schedule my first class for the following week. I immediately got to work at making flyers and was able to visit the Bell Building the next day to deliver them and meet Ms. Pam in person. She gave me a tour of the building and we were able to speak with residents to promote my upcoming class. It was on this tour that I realized the Bell Building was much different than the Tuminani center. The Bell Building is not a shelter for the homeless; it is housing for the formerly homeless. This seemingly small difference played a significant role in my future classes. Before I was planning on walking into a room full of people and starting a class or inviting them outside for yoga. Now, my task was to motivate participants to leave their apartments, come downstairs to the gym, and partake in yoga. An equivocal analogy is walking into a crowded common area to ask, "who wants to play ping-

pong” or putting up flyers in an apartment complex asking residents to “come play ping-pong at 5pm on Tuesdays.” It is clear the number of participants would be less in the latter. This issue became my chronic boulder. I would consistently need to draw more people in to yoga.

Regardless of the new situation, I set out with optimism for my first yoga class. I only had two participants that first class. I felt I was able to have ample time in speaking with them both and led meditation with a very simple vinyasa flow to introduce yoga to them. They both seemed to enjoy it and iterated they would come again. I continued to come every week and lead class, which consisted of meditation and a new vinyasa flow. There were never more than five participants, but I felt we were connecting, and I was able to better gauge how difficult I could make the class. After three classes, the participants were given the standardized surveys to assess how they had been affected by the yoga thus far. In a turn of events, I found they were not happy with the survey. I had complaints that the survey was assuming they were mentally ill since it asked questions about mental health. While I reassured them that the intent of the survey was by no means indicating they had any condition or illness, the damage was done. I could tell I lost trust from the participants. After that incident, I decided that I was not going to continue the surveys but instead we debriefed at the end of class about what was good with that particular flow, what could be improved, and how they were feeling as a whole with yoga. While this was not a scientifically validated method of assessing the program, it worked well to improve the class. I was able to tailor the meditation time to better guide them in breathing, take out poses that were too difficult, add others that better suited the participants, and further explain movements. An unexpected outcome of frequently asking feedback is how it strengthened our relationships with one another, increasing honesty and trust.

The program continued weekly. I was committed to having a class every week, despite being pregnant. The only class I cancelled was the day I went into labor. Tiana, one of the students on the board for DSC, took over my class for maternity leave. After my four weeks of leave, I continued showing

up weekly, even when the Bell Building cancelled my classes due to holiday events. I was always able to work with Ms. Pam to make sure I fit in a class each week. I believe it was this consistency that made the program strong. As classes went on, I heard amazing feedback about the health and mental benefits of yoga.

One of the regular attendees explained to me that she had a “bum leg” her entire life. When she started yoga, she walked with her left leg slightly dragging behind her on the ground. With yoga, her leg felt less painful and she was walking better. She said that even other residents in the building had commented on her improved ambulation. Another of the regular attendees, Mo, said the meditation and physical movement were helping her anxiety and overall improved her lifestyle. She stated that she had been trying to make healthy changes for years but was unable to do so. Yoga was the push she needed to start eating healthier and being more active. In fact, Mo missed a yoga class one week and said it negatively affected her mental health. She ended up staying indoors all week and the next yoga class was the first time she stepped foot outside of her apartment. She said yoga gave her a reason to get out of her home and improve her anxiety.

Some of the semi-regular attendees had similar sentiments. One man spoke of how yoga was necessary to help his shoulder. Another man told me he needed it to simply “stretch out” and that he always felt better after class. My favorite testimony though, was from a man who Mo had brought to yoga. He had gotten drunk earlier and was now in a terrible hangover. He kept excusing himself throughout class to vomit. This same man returned the next week for class. He told me he was about to leave to go get drunk again but then heard the overhead announcement for yoga class and decided to come instead. After the class, I asked if he still intended to go get alcohol. He said, since he just practiced yoga, he felt he needed to take better care of himself and therefore was going to return to his apartment and have coffee instead. This was a major victory in my eyes. I believe it proved the power of meditation, physical movement, and human connection.

Liz Henley  
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While these anecdotal statements are not objective evidence to evaluate my program, I believe they still prove the efficacy of yoga in improving physical health, mental health, and overall well-being. I feel I was able to obtain the ultimate goal of creating an impact with this program. Despite the numerous boulders I encountered, I was able to successfully meet my goals of establishing the logistics, implementing a class, and consistently improving it to tailor to the participants. The last goal of sustainability is still in the works, but I am working to advance it as much as I can.

I currently have two options for sustainability. My best option is for Mo to take over the class. As mentioned before, Mo is a current participant and actually the number one supporter of my class. She took it upon herself to make new flyers for the yoga program (she did not like the coloring of the ones I made) and distribute them to each resident's door. I also had difficulty with the staff not allowing me to make an announcement over the PA system before each class. Mo decided to take matters into her own hands and showed up early to each class to convince one of the administrators she knew well to make the announcement. She also started "bring a friend to yoga" day to help increase participation. Mo loves yoga and is quite a natural at it. She has led one class while I was in the audience, however, she found it more difficult than she anticipated, so she did not want to teach the following classes. I have talked to her about leading the class, and she is on the fence. She wants to lead the class but also does not want to take the whole project under her wing. I have tried to continue to encourage her and teach her what I can. I am anticipating staying with the project until August, at which point I will reassess the situation. The other option I have for sustainability is Dominique. Dominique is one of my classmates from MSUCOM. She has attended multiple classes with me and even led one herself. She is new to yoga but has fallen in love with it and fully supports the program. She has offered to take over the program for one year as the leader. She is aware I want Mo to take it over but is available as back-up in case Mo ends up declining.



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Regardless of how this specific program is sustained, I am proud to say that the idea of yoga for the formerly homeless has spread from this small project. Tiana, the one who led my maternity leave classes, loved the idea of yoga to improve mental and physical health in this population. Through witnessing my project, she worked with DSC to make a yoga program available to the employees of the Empowerment Program in Detroit. These employees are also formerly homeless men and women. I was told the first class was a success with over 30 people attending. To think this idea stemmed from my program and work at the Bell Building truly fills my heart with joy, and in some ways checks off the box of sustainability, as it has sustained the idea of health improvement for the formerly homeless through yoga.

Overall, I am pleased with how my project turned out despite the numerous boulders I encountered. While it did not go as smoothly as I hoped and I ended up targeting a slightly different population than my original intentions, I feel I was still able to make an impact with those who participated. My biggest take-away for how to be effective in a formerly homeless community is simply consistency. I touched on this earlier, but showing up every week truly made a difference. I heard from both administration and residents that most projects fade out rather quickly. The instructors get discouraged from lack of participation or allow other obligations to take precedence and therefore cancel frequently. Having consistency established confidence in a population that is not necessarily the most trusting. They come from a place of having been taken advantage of so often, it is difficult for them to know who can be reliable. Even though I had few participants, most people I saw in the hallway and lobby recognized me as “the yoga lady.” They would pass by and tell me they wanted to attend my class someday (but always “not today”). To me that spoke volumes to what simply showing up can do. Another take-away I had actually come from one of our fellowship cohorts. We learned that empowering others is not about giving power to someone, but about making them realize their own power. I found this to be so true. The more one of my participants realized their physical ability in a pose

or mental ability to meditate or breathe through a difficult movement, the more I saw them realize their own power. It was always theirs to begin with, but yoga helped them realize it and seize it. It is this type of empowerment that I believe caused Mo to change her lifestyle to healthy eating and exercise, or that man to decide not to get drunk. It is amazing what humans can accomplish when we recognize the power inside ourselves.

True empowerment was only one of the many lessons I learned through the fellowship. The cohort meetings taught me about the amount of work that goes into humanitarianism. I learned that altruism is simply not enough to sustain an impactful program. You need a plan, funders, sustainability measures, and a way to prove to others your work is worth their time and money. I have realized how important it is to collect data throughout your program or outreach. Investors want to see the numbers and facts in how your program is changing lives, word of mouth is simply not enough. I have recognized that anybody can be a potential funder, so you must always be prepared with a succinct pitch. While these things make my hair stand on end from how much business must be involved for a simple good deed, it is indeed a fact that I had to come to terms with. However, in the end, the most important thing is to never lose sight for the reason you began your humanitarian work.

In my future as a physician, I hope to serve the underserved, whether in inner cities or abroad. I am attending a trip to Malawi, Africa next year to help pursue this ultimate goal. What I have learned from the fellowship will not go amiss. It has already strengthened my resolve to serve where I can, when I can, and it has made me more prepared for my future humanitarian efforts.