

Yoga Warriors

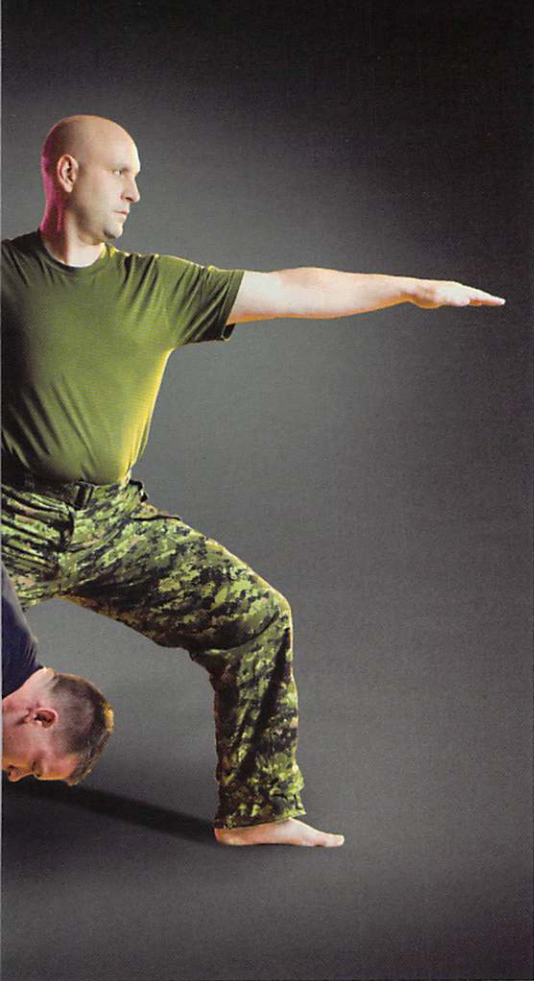
By: Kelly Thompson
Photography: Ratul Debnath

Nicole Taylor is quiet and unassuming in the yoga studio, and for a moment, you almost mistake her for one of the students, since she is busy milling around and chatting with everyone in the room. But this is no ordinary yoga session, so when Nicole settles into the front of the class and places herself calmly on the mat, it is shocking to discover that she is the instructor and her students are comprised of soldiers, policemen and women, paramedics and other first responders. At the Bliss Yoga Studio in Barrie, ON, they have gathered to be a part of a Yoga Warrior class, designed to help all who attend to cope with mental health related injuries from the intensity of the work they do.

It all began with Central Mass Yoga/Yoga Warriors, which is based out of West Boylston, Massachusetts and was founded by Lucy Cirmini. Lucy dreamed of merging the soothing effects of yoga with treatment for those suffering with combat stress and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) when she witnessed the effects of war trauma on her father. A few years later, Yoga Warriors was born and quickly spread across the United States. In early 2011, Nicole Taylor, an emergency room nurse and spouse of a Canadian Forces soldier, began searching out yoga

treatment options for those suffering with PTSD. By September, she was down in Massachusetts, receiving the life-altering training that she brought back to Canada, the very first Canadian to do so. From there, the practice exploded, with the first classes launched in late 2011, and the response was overwhelming. With the first three classes free to all first responders and soldiers, she has now managed to rack up a sizeable class of loyal followers. Teaching to this unique group of yogis is no easy feat. For a crowd not typically accustomed to getting in touch with their inner selves and often encouraged to ignore their physical and mental pain for the greater good and until the job is complete, Nicole is aware that the language and poses she employs must be geared towards this unique group. Yoga Warriors simply focuses on yoga poses combined with a reminder to remain in the moment, forget the to-do list at home, and practice meditation breathing.

The effects of this practice, to name a few, are a renewed sense of calm, personal awareness and relaxation for all who attend. If you need proof that Yoga Warriors can change lives, Paul Hywarren, an OPP officer, works as a first responder with the Underwater Search and Rescue Unit, with ninety-five percent of calls involving the recovery of bodies in murky Ontario waters.



"You can't be a first responder and not see or do things that bother you. You just lock it away in your private memory chest and hope they don't resurface." After seeing Nicole on the local news, and remaining sceptical, Paul immediately signed up for a series of classes. Soon he was a regular at Nicole's sessions, faithfully bending and stretching along with the rest of the class. "I came home and felt totally relaxed and at ease but had a boost of energy that I had never experienced before. When confronted with a stressful situation now, I just focus on my breathing and within minutes, I'm relaxed and calm."

For Nicole and Yoga Warriors, it doesn't stop there. She continued her training to now become the only certified Yoga Warriors instructor in Canada, capable of passing on this practice so that it may continue to spread across the country. After meeting the Chief of Defence Staff at a hockey game, General Natynczyk gave Nicole his email address, encouraging her to get in touch about her program. And living in close proximity to a military base has its advantages, allowing her to easily start a course at Canadian Forces Base Borden, where the class size had to be increased several times, in order to accommodate all of the interested soldiers. She has even taught classes to the local sledge hockey team, with Hockey Canada interested in bringing Nicole on to help their athletes deal with their injuries and benefit from all that yoga can do for both the body and mind.

A constant champion for first responders, soldiers and veterans, Nicole Taylor and the Yoga Warriors program are guaranteed to change the way in which we approach mental and physical injuries, and this is something that we, as a nation, need now more than ever.

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