

Teacher Launches Program in Thornwood to Help Children De-Stress

By Martin Wilbur

Elena Olivieri knows all about the pressure many of today's children face, particularly the urge to succeed academically. Whether there's extra duress placed on kids by parents, friends or even by their own expectations, the burden can be debilitating.

Olivieri, a fourth-grade teacher in the Ardsley School District, suffered her own troubles dealing with anxiety when she was in college--until she discovered meditation and yoga.

To help youngsters cope with similar issues that she faced, Olivieri has launched Child Cor, a children's wellness program she developed that combines dramatic arts, yoga and creative meditative practices to help youngsters manage stress.

"I think there's really a need for a program like this," said Olivieri, a certified yoga and meditation instructor.

Starting this weekend she will be holding Saturday classes for children between seven and 13 years old at the American Legion Hall in Thornwood. Parents can register for monthly sessions featuring four two-hour classes from 10 a.m. to noon.

Next month, Olivieri will start her first 23-class session at the same location that will last three months and be held from 4 to 5 p.m. on Mondays and Thursdays after school. There will also be sessions beginning in December and April.

The classes will feature a combination of yoga, meditation and dramatic arts, although each week a different proportion of time may be devoted to each activity depending on the students, said Olivieri, initially a drama major when she first attended the University of Miami. She transferred to Fordham where she earned her undergraduate and master's degrees studying elementary level education with a minor in history.

Olivieri's personal experience with yoga and meditation helped transform her life but it wasn't until she arrived in Budapest to teach for two years at the American International School that she was able to take what had benefitted her and help her students. She saw the positive effects that a combination of yoga, relaxation techniques and dramatic arts had on the children.

The most striking improvement was in her students' self-confidence but they also became more focuses and successful in other areas of their lives as well, she said. The classes include improvisation, mind exercises and breathing practices.

"Through these types of experiences with my students I found that I may not have been teaching arithmetic or the science of gravity, but I was teaching how to be proud of yourself, how to accept yourself and others, to appreciate your peers and how to be more present, which collectively enhanced the learning of all of their

common branch subjects," said Olivieri, who grew up in Elmsford and now lives in Connecticut. "I was teaching the whole child."

Since some people view yoga as a spiritual or even religious pursuit, Olivieri hasn't been able to use it in public schools in the United States. But in Budapest, where her 14 students came from 13 different countries, she noticed that children were helped regardless of their background.

It was early in her teaching career in New York City schools about 10 years ago when Olivieri first got the idea that yoga and meditation could help children. Some students worried until they got themselves sick over the state exams. What she saw was sometimes difficult to watch and she sought to find ways to help.

"Being a teacher in New York City, the state tests were taken far more seriously than here in Westchester," said Olivieri, who lived for about two years in Thornwood, which prompted her to look for a location for her classes. "We were told to sit the children who might throw up to sit them near the door."



Elena Olivieri, above, has developed a new program combining yoga, meditation and dramatic arts to help children relieve stress.

With Child Cor, she prefers to have about 12 children a class. Olivieri hopes to provide scholarships to two to five slots in each class.

"I want to get people from all different races, all different religions, all different backgrounds," she said.

The Saturday sessions cost \$125 a month while the twice-a-week after school classes will cost \$350 per session. The American Legion Hall is located at 54 Garrigan Ave. in Thornwood.

For more information about Child Cor, call 914-960-5335 or visit www.childcor.com.

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