

Georgetown Yogi Inspires Lunges, Bends & Stretches on Unique Path

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It's 9:30 on a summer Sunday morning. As most Washingtonians start to blink their eyes or roll back to sleep, Patty Ivey is striding toward the front of a 95-degree room packed with 60 people about to experience a nine-mile hike through the Borneo rainforest — or something like it.

Heads pop up expectantly as Ivey reaches the front. A few beads of sweat speckle the brows of the semi-clad audience, although the class has not yet begun. In a few minutes, they will be dripping. Then drenched.

“Good morning. My name is Patty. Let's come into downward facing dog,” she says simply. Dozens of bodies jump into an inverted V pose for which the studio is named.

“Take a deep breath in,” she calls out, all business. “Let a deep breath out. Point your sitbones way up to the sky. Let your head drop.”

The sound of breathing fills the room as the practice begins and moves into forward bends, backbends, and an intense set of lunges and full-body twists. Drips of sweat turn into rivulets, then steady streams, wiggling among the tight patchwork of mats.

“This is better than a cup of coffee, don't you think?” Ivey says with a wink. “Low push up! Upward facing dog! Downward facing dog.” She is just getting started.

Ivey's students — some would say masochists — are the diverse following of Down Dog Yoga, the Georgetown yoga studio Ivey opened in 2003. They are a regional battalion of devoted fans who have come to love — even need — the grueling 90-minute practice Ivey offers several times each day across the region.

With its push-ups, inversions and abdominal strengthening — in a room that routinely reaches — and stays in — the triple digits no matter the season, Ivey's brand of yoga is one of the most intense anywhere.

Why anyone would enthusiastically undergo this punishment is almost as counterintuitive as the zigzag that brought Ivey to this place — the unlikely journey of an intense, peppery New Yorker who resisted the practice for years — even after opening her own studio.

“I did not want to do yoga,” Ivey says frankly. “I thought it was pretty boring, actually.”

Ivey was about as far from a yoga mat as one can be as she went through a difficult divorce and was caring for her gravely ill mother in the mid 1990s. Wanting to try something different, she approached the Palm restaurant, applying to be a server. She had never been a waiter. She had no formal restaurant training. The closest she'd come to the restaurant business was founding a chain of bakeries called “The Cookie Lady” years before.

“They laughed at me,” she says. A hub of power and prestige, the Palm could hire the best in the serving business. But Ivey didn't give up. “I stopped by every day for months,” she said. Finally, after turning her away dozens of times, the managers gave her a shot.

They thought she would quit immediately — assigning her the back of the house near the entrance to the kitchen.

They didn't know her. The deceptively diminutive brunette — a dedicated runner — shuffled, sprinted, and sweat her way to success at the restaurant — or at least stability. Cash flowed into the pockets of the trademark white jacket she wore. But after two years hauling plates stacked up to her neck to A-list celebrities and the high-profile lunch crowd, the hours on her feet, breakneck pace and heavy loads were taking a physical toll.

A patron at the restaurant, chiropractor Dr. Jay Greenstein, noticed Ivey's tilted posture and begged her to do something. If you keep doing this job, he told her, you will cripple yourself.

Ivey had decided to become a massage therapist. Once again rising quickly to the elite level of the profession, she was hired by the Four Seasons in 1998, routinely earning three-figure tips on \$185 massage sessions. She was good, and the money was good. But the job had its drawbacks. The schedule could be uneven. Clients forgot appointments or canceled at the last minute. One Four Seasons regular gave \$300 tips, but insisted on being massaged naked. After Ivey complained, he wore a washcloth.

Chronically injured from marathon running, Ivey was encouraged to practice yoga by doctors. She declined. Around the same time a friend approached her and proposed a business partnership for a new yoga studio. Again, Ivey turned up her nose.

“I thought of it as a stretch class. I wasn't interested,” Patty said.

But the friend persisted and convinced her to try a class under Baron Baptiste, a bronzed poster-child of American yoga who brought his brand of vinyasa to the

Philadelphia Eagles and Hollywood, a yogi from childhood and vanguard in the field. Dragging her feet to the Baptiste studio in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Ivey was still going through the motions. Ninety minutes later, her life had changed.

“I thought, ‘This is unbelievable.’ I would have never thought this was yoga,” she recalls. “I looked at [my friend] and said, ‘This is what you want to open? I’m in.’”

According to their business plan, Ivey would run the business of the studio, while her friend did the teaching. Ivey wasn’t practicing and had no interest in teaching. Then, the impossible happened. Her friend quit the business. Ivey was on her own. She stood at the front of classes and somehow taught the sessions.

“It was terrible. I didn’t know the sequence,” Ivey said. “I had to use cue cards. It was extremely uncomfortable.”

“I kept trying to hire people to do that part that I didn’t want to do,” Ivey said. Finally, a friend she had hired to teach at the studio said, ‘You’re in this business of growing and asking people to step out of their comfort zone, but you’re not doing it. Can you step into the side of the business that makes you uncomfortable? If you don’t, this business will never succeed.’”

For the first time, Ivey immersed herself in actually practicing. It started to change her life.

“I said, I don’t know what the hell I’m doing, but I’m going to find mentors and teachers and I’m going to do it,” Ivey says. “That’s when everything started to change.”

Each day, Ivey would run down from her Dent Place home, filled with four rescued animals (Lulu, Lucas, Elijah and Sunshine) to the studio by the canal. With the help of her artist husband Scott Ivey and a posse of loyal teachers, Ivey pulled the business from crisis to stability to methodical, steady growth. The company now has studios in Bethesda and Herndon, over 30 employees, and plans for more studios are under consideration.

There is no New Age philosophizing or preaching in Ivey’s classes. But there is discipline. Every class starts on time. Gum chewing and talking are not allowed.

“If you’re here, really be here,” Ivey calls out to the class. She is not afraid to correct and call out those who distract others in this space.

And she is straight, dead straight. You will not see Ivey laughing nervously or saying something insincere. She does not do small talk to speak of. But she is intensely honest and present.

This is part of what draws legions of people — some of whom drive extreme distances to get to class — to experience an intense physical and spiritual practice aimed at creating space for personal transformation while building strength, focus and balance.

“Yoga allows me to think sharper, have more energy, and manage better,” says contracts and commercial lawyer Hilary Cairnie, who goes to Down Dog from his downtown office or his Virginia home. “It is a central component of my ability to be successful in my career, in my family, and my personal life.”

“When I do yoga, I feel like I can finally breathe,” says Georgetown Univ. English major Katherine Duncan, 21.

“It’s different from a ‘university’ way of thinking where everyone marches the same way. Yoga has helped me know myself.”