



By Chip Womick
Staff Writer

ASHEBORO – Ginger Garner weds East and West to create a unique healing program for her patients. She melds modern-day techniques from her training as a physical therapist with centuries-old traditions in yoga and Eastern medicine to address ailments at her Living Well Studio on the North Carolina coast.

Eventually, she plans to study Native American medicine. She boasts Cherokee bloodlines on both side of her family tree. Garner delves into an individual's being, a holistic inquiry that involves going beyond a person's physical condition to explore emotional and spiritual health, not promoting dogma, but recognition of the beauties, bounties and wonders of life.

She might ask what color a person's bedroom is painted or how he likes his job. She sometimes employs music therapy, aromatherapy, meditation and Thai yoga massage. She might even "prescribe" volunteer work. "The surest way to help yourself is to help somebody else,"

she said. Garner teaches other health-care professionals her special approach to healing through a program she developed called Professional Yoga Therapy™.

She is scheduled to present two courses at Randolph Hospital next spring. "Yoga therapy is going to become a huge trend," said the 1991 graduate of Southwestern Randolph High School during a visit home for Thanksgiving. Just a few years ago, she said, there were only six or seven yoga therapy schools in the nation; in 2008, there were nearly 30; now, there are almost 50. Garner said Professional Yoga Therapy Studies program was is the only yoga therapy school in the nation designed solely for health-care practitioners.

An evolving focus is women's health, particularly regarding birth, from prenatal care, to labor and delivery to post-partum care. She is working on a book – the working title is "Fit and Fearless Birth" – that she said will be a guide to yoga for "the season of motherhood." "There's so much fear that surrounds childbirth and pregnancy," she said. "I want to shatter that myth. It doesn't have to be that way." The journey began when she fired her obstetrician – and hired a midwife – when she was pregnant with her first child. "I believe this with all my heart – we're losing the birth experience in America," she said.

For a time during her high school days, Garner envisioned law school in her future. Then a classmate gave a presentation about physical therapy in an AP English class and her plans shifted.

After earning a degree in athletic training at UNC Wilmington, she spent a year as a trainer at Asheboro High School. Then she enrolled in the physical therapy program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

The training ranks among the tops in the nation, she said, but she was disenchanted with the nearly single-minded curative focus of the discipline. "It seemed to have very few answers for how we were to prevent these things," she said.

She pursued her interest in grassroots prevention programs via independent study through the university's School of Public Health, working on a pilot program for the Governor's Council of Fitness to determine the fitness needs of state residents. The program "never saw the light of day," she said, but opened her eyes to the health needs of the average person.

After earning her master's degree in physical therapy, she worked in outpatient orthopedics, gradually weaving some Eastern traditions, including yoga, into treatment of her patients. Her first exposure to yoga had come in her high school days, thanks to her mother, Deborah Garner. Ginger was attracted to the non-competitive nature and the peace and solitude of the discipline. Practicing yoga gave her time to think.

She opened her yoga and physical therapy studio in a tiny space in Emerald Isle near Morehead City. On opening night more than 30 people showed up, but there was only room for 12-15. In less than a year, the studio moved to quarters three times as large.

Among her biggest challenges are convincing people that anyone can do yoga – whether it's someone 95 or someone with osteoarthritis in her knees. "Anybody can do it," she said.

Another obstacle is the notion among some people that yoga is a religion. The web site for her school addresses the question in this way: "Yoga does not contain religion. Religion can contain yoga, however.

Where your concern comes from is likely related to your knowledge of religions that contain yoga. (Professional Yoga Therapy Studies) is non-dogmatic and therefore teaches yoga therapy separate from any religious connection. We also do not teach toward any specific form of yogic philosophy. There is a large amount of misunderstanding in the western world about yoga and its spirituality (or lack thereof)."

Garner is a charter member of the International Association of Yoga Therapists and recognizes the need for creating educational standards in the field of yoga therapy. She said she is careful that what she teaches is backed by research. Eastern medicine and yoga may be better suited for prevention or as a predictor of problems, Garner said.

"I can tell when a shoulder is going to be in trouble five years out," she said.

Meanwhile, she said, people come to the United States from all over the world seeking high-tech Western medical knowledge and techniques. Her son, Michael, needed heart surgery last year.

“Western medicine saves life every day,” she said. “Western medicine saved my son’s life. You can’t ignore that. You’ve got to throw your arms around both and realize both have intrinsic value. I think there’s a better system for healing when you put the two together.”

The typical Western patients is passive, Jablonski explained. Her integrative approach changes the picture. A typical physical therapy regimen is three or four times a week for several weeks. Jablonski said she rarely sees a patient more than once a week.

“You’re there 100 percent,” she said. “You do learn how to precisely control your body. It’ll put health care back in the hands of the person instead of it being the other way around.”

For more information, log on to www.gingergarner.com. Garner also has a blog for women and mothers-to-be at www.gingergarner.blogspot.com.

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