



# Karma Yoga in Action:

## Ana Forrest & yogaHOPE

Healing Ourselves through Personal Empowerment

By Raven Sadhaka Seltzer

With eyes closed, Jamie draws a breath and takes it deep into her belly, as if her very life depended on it; her head and upper body scoop into upward-facing dog pose. She drinks in another breath, lifts her hips up, and presses into downward-facing dog. All the while she focuses on the flow of her breath, in and out, feeding her body, mind, and spirit in a way that drugs and alcohol never could. This is not just another yoga student in another yoga class: Jamie is a recovering addict, and yoga has become her new lifeline, her ticket out of a dead-end future.

One of the most recent graduates of yogaHOPE's certificate program, Jamie is also the first student to be mentored. Her experience has been life altering: "I've never completed anything in my life or given my 'all' to something," she says, "but through this program I've been able to completely give myself to the practice of yoga and use it as one of my coping mechanisms. It's helped me work a lot on my self-acceptance and my spirituality."

While many individuals and organizations offer free classes to underserved women in recovery and transition facilities, Sue Jones, a 41-year-old wife and mother of two young boys, had a bigger vision for yogaHOPE. In addition to regular yoga classes, these women are given access to a certificate of completion program and a mentoring program, hence the moniker HOPE, which stands for Healing Ourselves through Personal Empowerment.

Master yoga instructor Ana Forrest came on board earlier this year to lend her support and her national network of teachers to the cause.

She plans to offer openings in her teacher trainings to the young women who pass the certificate program and want to become fully certified. YogaHOPE will provide the funding.

Drawing from her own experience of drug addiction and recovery, Ana is a perfect partner for this venture. "I think that we evolve through the fires that we have to walk through," she says. "I know that's been true for me." And though she is quick to give all of the credit to the many volunteers who keep yogaHOPE moving forward, Sue is most certainly the heart and driving force behind this vision. What's more inspiring still is that this vision came forth from her very own "fire walk."

Sue began attending classes at Baptiste Yoga Studio in Cambridge, Massachusetts, just before her marriage fell apart. She relates, "I had completely erased myself and was in self-destructive patterns. I became suicidal. I was living by myself, and I remember that, on the days when I did not have my kids, I would not get out of bed unless I was going to yoga class. I would drag myself to the studio. As soon as I got onto the mat, I felt this incredible sense of relief. It was like a 'safety zone,' where ending my life was not an issue any more. Going to yoga class literally saved my life."

After taking the Baptiste Teacher Training, she felt completely transformed; Sue was able to put her marriage back together (her husband also began a regular yoga practice). She wanted to reach out and share this practice with a population that normally could not afford yoga classes. She searched for volunteer teaching opportunities on the

Internet, which brought her to her first facility, Hello House. As Sue saw the need for more yoga classes at this and other similar facilities, she began placing ads for volunteer teachers on the Internet, and yogaHOPE was born.

When Sue made contact with Ana Forrest at the 2007 Yoga Journal Conference in San Francisco, the master teacher quickly recognized the potential of this program. "Not only have Sue and yogaHOPE made great efforts to help these women in desperate straits, they are also encouraging them to be able to get big enough and generous enough to turn it around and give back," she says.

Many of these young women end up returning to rehab. No matter how much they may have changed, sometimes the pull is too strong; it's very easy to go under again. Through the vision of yogaHOPE, these women

finally have a way to break past patterns and habits through new career skills, not to mention new life skills. And that leads to the next goal of the program: to



Sue (center), with program graduates, Vanessa and Kristin (left to right).

open yogaHOPE studios in areas where people can afford to pay the going rate for a class. Sue's dream is that these studios would eventually be completely operated and staffed by graduates of the program.

Through trial and error, the typical yogaHOPE class came about. It's one hour long and offers a basic vinyasa sequence, with some important differences: "We begin in child's pose to get the women to 'come into their breath.' We get them used to having hands placed on them," Sue explains. "In these facilities, they are not allowed to touch each other, and many of these women have been traumatized and sexually abused at some point, so this may be their first experience being touched in a loving and respectful way, and they all really respond to it."

The response to yogaHOPE has been overwhelmingly positive. Yogis and yoginis want to see it happen in their hometowns, and a satellite program has just begun in Seattle. Even the retailer Lululemon has gotten in on the act—it has made yogaHOPE its "official" charity, donating yoga clothes and supplies to the women who complete the certificate program.

Sue notes that many of the volunteers come into this work thinking they are going help women who are so much less fortunate than themselves. "They initially think of these women as victims, but what they find, as I did, is that we all have a lot in common—no matter what shape it takes. Whether you are recovering from addiction or an eating disorder or depression, these are all just symptoms of similar experiences, so we all end up connecting in this amazing way."

YogaHOPE currently has 40 plus volunteer teachers and operates out of six facilities in the Boston area and one in Seattle. A number of facilities are on the horizon. [www.yogahope.org](http://www.yogahope.org)

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## ABOUT THE FOUNDER

SUE JONES,  
CEO AND FOUNDER



*Sue, Founder and Executive Director of yogaHOPE has practiced yoga for over 10 years. Sue is a trained associate Baptiste yoga instructor and she combines her knowledge of the Baptiste Power Vinyasa yoga*

*style with her keen sense of intuition to craft classes that help her students access a deeper understanding of themselves. Sue trains and leads a team of 50+ volunteer teachers who donate their time in 11 substance abuse and homeless shelters for women in and around the Boston area; averaging 15 classes a week. Just recently yogaHOPE has gone nation wide with hosting yogaHOPE classes in Seattle, Washington. In addition, Sue is in the process of launching sister yogaHOPE programs in New York City, San Francisco and Los Angeles.*

*yogaHOPE was started on the heels of Sue hitting rock bottom in her life, due to childhood abuse. As a last ditch effort, Sue turned to yoga, and it literally saved her. As a result, she pledged that if she was ever at a point where she was able to give back, she would create a free yoga program for women in need—hence, yogaHOPE. To date, Sue and her crew of volunteers have helped numerous women who are living in Boston area shelters and rehabilitation facilities who now have the strength and confidence in themselves to move beyond difficult chapters in their lives by immersing themselves into the teachings of yoga.*

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