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Aerial yoga a hit at Palmetto Art Center

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By Susan Hemmingway — Herald Health Correspondent

In yoga classes at the Palmetto Art Center you'll find the traditional "props" of blocks and straps that students use to stretch just a little bit further in yoga poses. But you'll also see silky teal and purple yoga hammocks hanging from ceiling to floor. These are props for aerial yoga.

Adjustable to height, the vertical hammocks are used to wrap the fabric around toes for basic poses to relying on the fabric for support in inverted poses and standing splits.

"In some poses, you're flipping around like you're Superman," said Pam Edward Batey, a retired engineer who lives in Bradenton and takes aerial yoga classes at the art center.

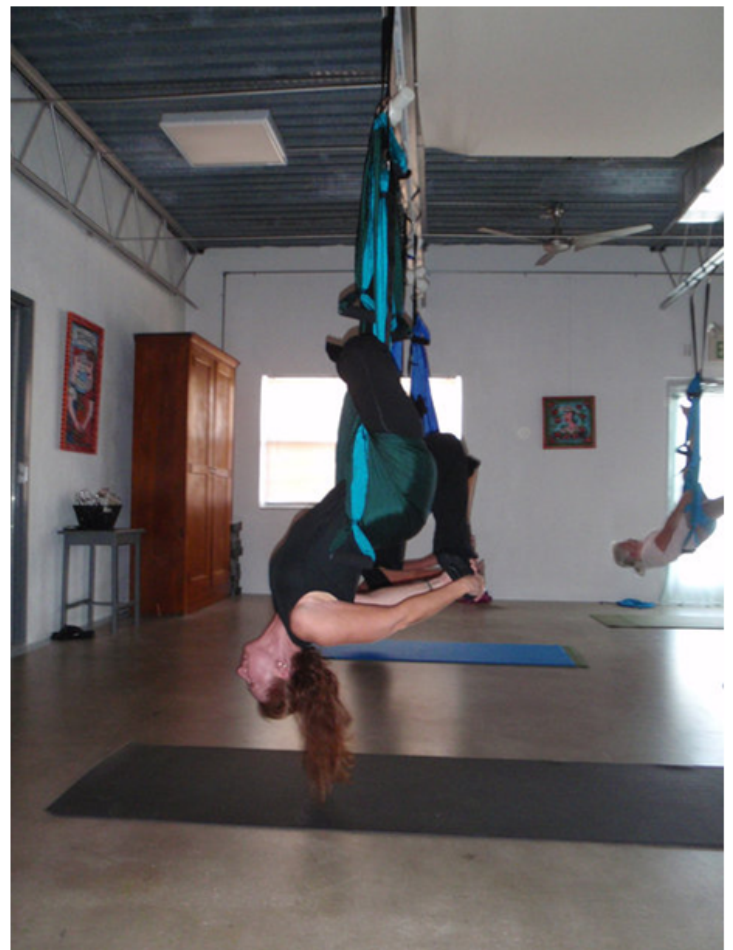
A yoga devotee for more than 20 years, Batey said the hammocks gradually have allowed her to do deeper stretches in poses that involve the upper body.

They have also improved range of motion through her shoulders after shoulder surgery.

Yoga instructor LaRae Brownwell teaches the aerial yoga classes. She schedules 75-minute aerial yoga workshops several times a month at the center and also teaches private group classes.

Aerial yoga classes at the art center fill up quickly because Brownwell limits them to 10 students to provide plenty of individual attention.

"In some ways people think it will be really hard, and in some ways it's easier because it gives you support," said Brownwell, who became enchanted with aerial yoga after being introduced to it in early 2011.



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Initially, she bought an aerial yoga hammock for herself and swung the adjustable straps around a tree limb in her backyard. She loved the feeling of being airborne in the silky hammock while doing yoga poses.

"It's like you're playing like a child," she said.

After getting fed up by the bloodthirsty mosquitoes that lurked in her backyard, Brownwell found a better spot to pursue aerial

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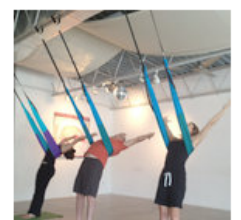


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Brownwell found a better spot to pursue aerial yoga behind an old soccer goal post in a park near the fairgrounds.

In the traditional corpse pose -- the usual yoga-class ender -- she looked like she was being supported in a motherly cocoon. In aerial yoga, corpse poses gently nestle the whole body in a cabana-like swath of fabric two or three feet from the ground.

Eventually she invested in additional vertical hammocks to teach classes. The hammocks are constructed from colorful, silky parachute fabric. They are paired with thick sturdy straps that are hooked to the ceiling and hang to the floor.

The straps have loops on each side where students attach the hammocks through hooks according to their height. Throughout the class, hammocks are moved higher or lower depending on the pose.

For sitting poses, they are suspended about three inches from the floor, said Brownwell.

Not as hard as it looks

For some, the classes may seem intimidating at first -- who besides the daring eagerly flip into a head-to-the-ground pose just because fabric is wrapped around their legs and waist?

By the second class, however, it doesn't feel quite so scary, according to students in a recent Saturday class at the art center.

"At first, you might be afraid of swinging (in the hammock) and that you're going to slip out of it," said Vicki Orrenmaa of Bradenton, a yoga student for the past four years who decided to give aerial yoga a try.

"Once you get used to trusting the fabric -- that it's going to support you -- you really can do deeper stretches," said Orrenmaa.

For Janet Bordeau, another class participant and longtime yoga enthusiast, aerial yoga demands more core work because of how using the vertical hammock involves stabilizing the body.

"This to me is a little more exciting because you're settling into the fabric," she said.

"You feel lengthened and stretched and relaxed and really at peace by the end of the class."

For more information about aerial yoga classes at the Palmetto Art Center, 907 Fifth St. W., Palmetto, and a schedule of upcoming workshops, visit Brownwell's website at www.yogagirlie.com. Cost of the 75-minute workshops is \$20. You can register and reserve a spot on the website or call Brownwell at 941-527-9847.

Susan Hemmingway, Herald health correspondent, can be reached at shemmingway@hotmail.com.

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