

up more. You stretch farther. You can go deeper into your poses," she explains. She also points out that when you tense a muscle, "it stops blood flow for a moment and when you open it up, Whoosh! The blood rushes in. It pushes toxins out and then you're breathing deeply so it draws the oxygen in and super oxygenates it."

All the workouts and aerobics and yoga practice has obviously done Joyce Almarode some good. At age 61, she is the youngest looking grandmother you will ever see. Her skin is as toned and smooth as someone half her age.

She accepts the compliment shyly and then shows a photo of her parents taken last year, when her dad was 92 and her mom, 86. They both look 70 max. "My mother always says, 'you're lucky Joyzey, because it's genetics,'" she laughs. Still, the physical and mental training has helped immeasurably.

That and her diet. She and Mel have been eating organic since they were in their 20s. They used to grind their own flour for bread and raise honey bees. Nowadays, they shop exclusively at Whole Foods. Does she ever splurge on goodies? "I buy real good chocolate. That's my junk food."

Believe it or not, Joyce Almarode is not a strict vegan. "As a true yoga practitioner, if I were going to be absolutely pure, I should be a pure vegetarian," she admits. But she gets protein from farm fresh eggs and Greek yogurt, and she occasionally eats chicken and fresh fish. "All this body is, is a house for your spirit," she says reverently. "It is your spirit's house, so you should take care of it."

Not that she's been injury or disease free over the past six decades. Joyce slipped on ice one winter causing bone fragments to separate from five neck vertebrae. That was painful. And believe it or not, she blew out a knee dancing at the infamous wild and crazy Orange bar/restaurant Horse Feathers one night during the height of the step aerobics craze. She tore the other knee in an overcrowded Tai Chi class. She scowls slightly and refers back to Bonnie Prudden's original misadventure. "She taught us to be very careful with people, to...do...no...harm."

Born in Cheyenne, WY, the granddaughter of Greek immigrants, Joyce grew up in a military environment, living in places as varied as Hawaii and Iowa, before meeting Mel on a drill field at Virginia Tech. Regarding her spiritual health, she prays and practices yoga and meditates daily. But she adds with a gleeful snort, she is anything but



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT
Virginia "Jinnie" Mason has been coming to Joyce Almarode's exercise classes for 32 years. At age 78, she demonstrates better flexibility than many people a quarter her age.



PHOTO BY SUSIE AUDIBERT
Tuesday evening student Kim Welchlin demonstrates three of the 26 challenging poses during the 90-minute "hot" Bikram-style yoga class.

Miss Goody Two Shoes. "You can ask Mel. I have a foul mouth. I'm a military brat," adding "Can I be crabby? Absolutely! Am I perfect? Absolutely not!"

In addition to yoga, Joyce practices the slow-motion Chinese Tai Chi, which she calls, "moving meditation." She has also taken up myo-therapy, which employs pressure points to relieve muscle pain. And she practices, with her 11-year-old granddaughter Lexi, the healing art of Reiki, which has elements of the old-time religious practice of 'the laying on of hands.' "You can feel it," she says. "It'll tingle. We all have energy vortexes, we all do, in our hands."

Reflecting on when she used this technique to great effect on her daughter and, most recently, on her dying father, she adds, "I feel like I was really blessed.

I was steered towards doing something that is probably the best thing in the world for me and because of that, it helps my family. I'm able to help other people."

Back at the dance studio, Joyce Almarode dims the lights. The students in class lie down on their backs, arms outstretched, palms upward. One of them, Virginia Mason, has been with Joyce from the beginning, some 32 years now. At age 78 "Jinnie" will astound you with her flexibility, thanks to yoga. Joyce says, "I often joke that I'll never retire and it's probably true, because you're never too old to practice yoga." Her oldest student was 85 before she had to move away.

The time has come for the progressive relaxation portion of the class. Joyce's sing-song voice drops the half octave and halves in volume as she hypnotically guides us through this relaxation exercise. It starts at the tips of our toes and progressively works its way up our bodies, ending at the top of our heads. If you could bottle this, you'd need a permit.

She concludes with this: "Feel your scalp and the skin of your body relax...alllll your muscles within you relax... alllll your vital organs within you relax... Feel every cell of you inside and out now com-plete-ly relaxed... your breathing relaxed... your mind relaxed... If any thought should enter your mind, you can observe it without judging it, and allow that thought to float away...like a cloud in the sky.... Bring your mind back to stillness, your body, your mind, your breath, alllll relaxed together in Savasana, the pose of repose..."

Total silence for five minutes...Then she raps the bowl.

Dong.....nnnnng.....nnnnng.....nnnnng.

The yoga teacher



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT
Before yoga class begins, Joyce Almarode reads a lesson. Note the metal bowl and striker at her knees.

Dong.....nnnnng.....nnnnng.....nnnnng. The resonant frequency of the metal bowl seems to hum forever. Joyce Almarode sits on a mat; her students facing her, their thumbs and index fingers barely touching, the classic OK hand position of calmness and clarity of mind.

Joyce rolls a short leather-strapped stick around the edge of the bowl, setting up an eerie vibration, just like rubbing your finger at precisely the right pressure and speed to make a wine glass sing. Her voice lowers a half octave and halves in volume. She softly reads today's lesson as one continuous sentence.

"Words are vibrations of thoughts and thoughts are vibrations of power and energy and how it behooves us to think positive thoughts as much as possible and speak positive thoughts as much as we're able because all of that energy goes out in the universe and it affects everyone around us, and energy is never destroyed, so if we can send positive energy out, it has a good effect on the whole world." She pauses to breathe and continues.

"If there are people in life who you find constantly bring you down or fill you with negativity, you may consider those people as poisonous to your health, and it's not wrong to limit your time with those people, because if your health is poisoned, it's possible that it will affect the good effects that you could have on others as well as yourself." She breathes deeply again. Breathing is important in yoga.

"Close your eyes," she purrs. Her students' eyelids drop. "Eliminate all outside thoughts...Release any worries and concerns...Let go of the past...Bring your mind's awareness into your physical body." A palpable calm settles over the room. All you can hear is her students' rhythmic breathing. Yoga class has begun.

Breathing exercise over, Joyce launches into a running detailed description of the poses she has her students do while

simultaneously demonstrating them. There are no "ums," no "uhs," just a never-ending stream of explicit instructions. She even remembers to tell you when to breathe. It is a remarkable exercise in multi-tasking. Let's listen in.

"Exhale. Lifting your hips, lower your heels, push on your hands and lift your hips even higher. Press back in your thighs, down into your heels and now raising your head, come to your fingers; inhale, step your left foot forward, right over your ankle, once more the back heel lifted, as you exhale, full fold; torso linked down the thighs, forehead comes in and chin is at your chest; inhale, bend your knees with belly in, open your arms UP... lifting and exhale to Namaste once more."

This goes on for an hour or better. Sometimes she demonstrates poses in the wall mirrors; sometimes she walks around behind her students and corrects them gently. But she never stops the running, almost musical, mantra.

Later, while sitting at her kitchen table in the comfy log home she and husband Mel built with their own hands some 30-plus years ago, Joyce Almarode explains. "The breath is really the core of it all, because by using your mind to calm your breath and using every part of your lungs to oxygenate, you calm your mind, and when you calm your mind, it calms the body." She nurses a cup of Kona coffee, and reflects on the progression of a typical yoga class. "And then after that, you practice the physical postures which can be very gentle or extremely challenging depending on what the needs of the class are. And usually you would end a class with some sort of quiet relaxation or meditation."

To the closed-minded, the ancient Indian art of yoga is hippie hocus pocus at worst; some sort of weirdo eastern religion at best. Joyce Almarode smiles patiently. She's used to countering the naysayers. "In America, you have to be careful because we're not supposed to preach too much. We're supposed to be more secular. But if I told you what it is for me personally, and what I believe it was meant to be in its purest form, it is the point of focusing, using your breath to control your body, using the postures to cleanse and rejuvenate every system in your body, the endocrine system particularly. It is to make you pure and to allow you to focus and be still so that you can become one with God."

Her eyebrows arch. She smiles beatifically. "So, if you have spiritual beliefs which I do, then the spiritual aspects of yoga are profound, and they go hand in hand. And churches shouldn't be afraid. A lot of churches are afraid or won't let you practice yoga in the church sanctuary because they think you're teaching Hinduism." She shakes her head "no." "I was raised Greek Orthodox. Although I don't belong to a specific sect now, I do believe in Christ as my Savior and I do believe that our spirits do go on... I think we become



PHOTO BY PHIL AUDIBERT
Joyce Almarode leads her class through a series of 'Asanas,' which are yoga poses, positions, and sequences that stimulate muscles, tendons, the endocrine system and the vital organs of the body.



just testing you to see if you were really interested."

Joyce was more than interested; she was determined. She went one-on-one with Priscilla for six months becoming certified to teach classic Multi-Level Hatha Yoga, "no props of any kind, taught the way it originally was in India."

Within one year, "all my classes but one were yoga classes." Gone was the boom box, the lead shot-filled denim weight bags, the steps and dance routines. "It was quite a change from mainly fast and loud, to calm and quiet classes for me and my students." Today, Joyce Almarode teaches yoga to group classes on Tuesdays and Wednesdays and to a handful of clients, one-on-one, in their homes. "Yoga can be real challenging for people who are in excellent health or physical shape. But it can also be very gentle for those who think they

more and more spiritual, and we are energy beings, and this physical body will be gone. But the essence of us will continue to get higher and higher and higher until we become totally one with God."

Joyce Almarode...you've come a long way since you started teaching the oh-so-southern and demurely-named "Ladies Exercise Class" back in 1978. That's when she answered an ad in this newspaper for a summertime director's position for the Orange County Recreation Association. She and Mel and daughter Malaika had moved here three years prior so she could take classes at UVA, while Mel taught in the Orange County Public School system and built their house.

"I've really always been fascinated with how the body works," she says, "and I've always wanted to help people." But she didn't want to become a nurse because, as she readily admits, "I don't like people telling me what to do."

So, she did what she always does in this situation, which is to ask to be shown the way. "Please show me how I can use my energy in a way that will be helpful to me as well as others," she prayed. "And that very week I saw an article in *Parade Magazine* on Bonnie Prudden." She immediately enrolled in a five day workshop with the then guru of the President's Council on Physical Fitness. Even before she left for the workshop in Amherst, MA, she responded to the ad in the *Orange Review*. Joyce Almarode already knew what she wanted to do.

"Every morning and every night, I would spend at least an hour...practicing, that's how dedicated I was. I was determined I was going to get in good shape and I was going to really know how to do this and I was going to be a good teacher."

And so the hugely popular "Ladies Exercise Class," was born. For every hour of class, Joyce had to put in three of preparation; tracking down appropriate music from WJMA's record library and



REVIEW FILE PHOTO
Joyce Almarode was first hired for the summertime director's position for the Orange County Recreation Association in the summer of 1978.

choreographing routines. She even sewed lead shot-filled denim weight bags. Lugging a 22-pound boom box "with an enormous woofer," she taught 12 classes per week! "Sometimes we'd have 33 people in a class, just jam-packed. Sometimes we had waiting lists for those classes." Her eyes open up wide. "Here in Orange!" she marvels. "And I would come home at night and eat six corn muffins at once, because I was burning up so many calories."

By 1982, she had moved to Sedwick's Racquetball Club, and she has taught classes in the mirror-lined dance studio ever since. "Ladies Exercise Class" morphed into step aerobics, partly because, well, men were showing up. She taught everything. "Water exercise, high-impact, low-impact, geriatric, people with mental disabilities, children, classes for arthritics in warm pools." In the summer, "we jumped, ran, square danced, did sit-ups with our legs hooked over the edge of the pool wall."

Those classes are no longer, due mostly to mail order videos and cable TV programs. "Now everybody can get it in their house if they want it," shrugs Joyce. "So, that's changed it a lot for people like me."

But she was ready for a change anyway. In fact she was already making the transition to yoga, having discovered it when she was at Virginia Tech. But it really caught on in 1996, when she and a friend and student, Karin Merrill immersed themselves in a three-day yoga workshop at the Ashram Satchinanda, better known as "Yogaville," in Buckingham County. "And I thought, 'you know, this is really what I should be doing now'... I was ready for a change and those three days reconnected me to the power and peace of yoga practice."

To teach it, she needed to be certified. "So I throw out to the universe again; I need to be certified. I need a teacher," and her prayers were answered. Actually, it took 10 unanswered phone messages before Priscilla Okugawa called back "and told me 'I was

can't do anything," she reassures.

She also helps the Woodberry Forest cross country team to focus and improve balance and breath control through yoga. Coach Ben Hale wrote last season, "Joyce, as always, you were a really central and essential part of the success of the squad." As a result of her training, the team "made the most improvement we've ever seen."

She tells how she taught the WFS harriers a simple relaxation technique: She demonstrates. Sitting in a chair, she extends her legs. "You cross at the ankle, it doesn't matter which ankle. You cross at the wrist, palm to palm, interlace your hands, move your thumbs up your middle, turn your hands out till your little finger presses right in the center of your chest. You put your tongue at your hard palate right behind your teeth, and your eyes are gazing at your third eye, the center of your forehead, and you just take deep breaths, supposedly for two minutes." Her eyes close. "It works for me if I only take five long deep breaths. I can be extremely agitated, very worried and do this and I'm absolutely fine afterwards." It worked for the cross country team; they all did it just before winning the state championship.

Joyce Almarode also teaches Bikram-style yoga on Tuesday evenings. This is not for the faint of heart. It is an intense 90-minute workout that runs you through 26 poses in a room where the thermostat is set to 90 degrees. "It's tough," she confirms. "When I first started doing it, it literally made me feel nauseous, sick to my stomach." But, she points out, "it affects every part of your endocrine system, every muscle, every tendon, every ligament. When you're done, you will have worked every part of your body." On Thursdays she joins a class in Charlottesville where (are you ready for this?) the temperature is between 105 and 114, which she agrees is "too hot!"

Why so hot? "When you're warmed up, your muscles will open