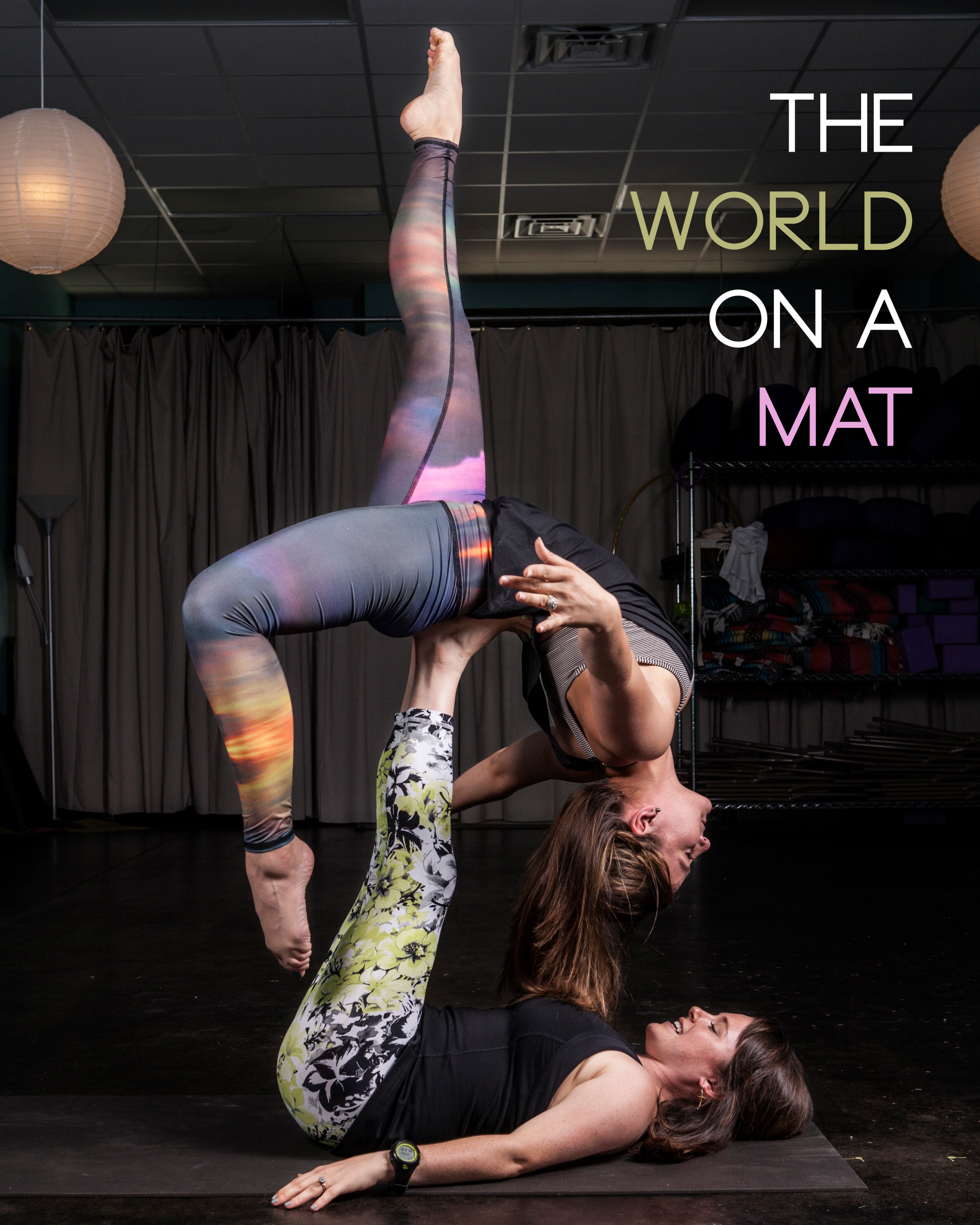


THE WORLD ON A MAT





BY MARYLYNN ALEXANDER

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARTIN GRAHAM MEYERS

LET's pretend it's your first time in the studio. Feeling a little nervous, you roll out your mat and sit down. Your neighbor leans over and says, "Don't worry I had the jitters my first time, too." From where you sit, you can see the door. It opens and in walks a petite teenage girl with dark hair. The door opens again and in walks a middle-aged business man. After him comes an older woman with her grand-daughter. Next to arrive is a young boy built like an athlete.

As these individuals file through the door with the sun shining behind them, it's as if the sunlight illuminates your mind as well. It dawns on you that the community of Blue Sky is incredibly diverse and beautiful. "I think I just might like this place," you say out loud. Your neighbor replies, "Yeah, I think you just might."

The clock nears 5:30, and in walks a light-footed, cheery spirited woman with red hair in pigtails. This is Donna Ponder. She says, "Let's begin, class. Child's pose please." You fold your legs under your body, stretch your arms out straight in front of you, and rest your forehead on the mat. She instructs you to suck in your breath and then empty it out. The breathing in the room turns into a rhythm, and it rolls back and forth like the waves of an ocean.

You move to another pose, then another, and yet another. Each one has a new level of difficulty and its own set of challenges. As you try these new positions, Donna's voice washes over you like water, encouraging you. "Stay in it. What we do on the mat affects what you do out there. It's okay if it's messy," she says, "there's no perfect yoga."

You look over at the person next to you and see her red face and wobbly legs and realize that it's hard for her, too. You hear some laughs and a couple encouraging words peppered throughout the room, and a smile breaks out on your face.



Finally, Donna instructs you to lay flat on your back, breathe in and out, release your worries and become aware only of your breathing and your body. After a few moments the entire class sits up, places their hands together and rests them on their forehead. "All together we say, 'Namaste.'" "Namaste" is a phrase that means "the light in me honors the light in you." Donna leads the class in the signature closing statement.

Claps pop up throughout the room and the business man high fives the cheerleader next to him. The football player congratulates the mom on the neighboring mat. You walk out into the evening sunset knowing you're hooked. A feeling of peace has washed over you and as you leave it lingers. The final Savasana pose leaves a still, calm mind that is aware only of one's own existence. This type of meditation is called Samadhi, or as Baron Baptiste referred to it, "Blue Sky Mind." It will hook you, just like it hooked Donna, who owns the studio and lives and breathes yoga. Let's talk about her for a bit.

Donna's journey began eleven years ago when a friend started teaching yoga and she helped her study and practice the different poses. She remembers the feeling of peace that drew her in. "The first time I did yoga, my body emptied out, my head emptied out, everything went empty, and all my stress melted away," she said. After that, Donna knew she wanted to do more yoga and eventually teach.

So, in 2007 she went to the Catskill Mountains to train with Baron Baptiste. For seven long days, she bent, twisted, and stretched her body into pose after pose. The participants went without caffeine, refined sugar, and cell service the entire time, something quite incomprehensible to many of us. Donna felt freed by the experience and came back to Louisiana eager to share what she had learned. "We did a lot of physical work, but we also cleared our heads in order to relate with the people we would teach," she said. She reached her Level 2 certification in 2009 after spending a couple of years studying other yoga practices, writing papers about various philosophies and methodologies, and perfecting an instructional DVD that reflected her personal perspective of yoga.

In 2010, Donna's dream came true, but it did not happen without lots of hard work and sacrifice. After opening Blue Sky Yoga, she worked seven days a week for over a year. Now, she has a staff of 10 instructors and 27 classes per week on the schedule. She personally teaches 13 classes at the studio in Monroe and four classes in Ruston at Louisiana Tech and Ruston Parks and Recreation.

Her studio is a thriving and vibrant place. Donna works hard to cater to every student's individual needs and level. "Yoga is for everyone. As long as you are willing to check your ego at the door, you can leave feeling accomplished." At Blue Sky, there is no feeling of judgment, competition, or comparison. There are no mirrors on the wall for you to evaluate yourself against others, feel self-conscious, or become embarrassed. Donna helps both beginners and long-time practitioners develop their form. "You may have to make modifications as your body changes," she says, "but it is a lifestyle."

Blue Sky even offers a "Yoga for Life" class, which is specifically geared to help people with limited range of motion, recovering from injuries, suffering from Fibromyalgia, arthritis, and Parkinson's disease, recuperating from chemotherapy, and regaining strength after a pregnancy or major surgery. Donna reminds her participants that "as long as you do what you can where you are, yoga is something you can do for a lifetime." This is her reminder to first accept your limitations and then use yoga as a way to find relief and healing from within.

In the fast-paced, grab-and-go world we live in, it takes an admirable level of dedication and discipline to practice yoga. "I am in the business of selling a healthy lifestyle," Donna claims, "though it's much easier to sell fried chicken and doughnuts." She is right that it is far easier to find comfort at the bottom of a bucket of fried chicken, but that crispy, greasy instant gratification will leave you walking around a little heavier and unhealthier, not with the sense of serenity, strength, and confidence that yoga gives you. The benefits of yoga are felt in both mind and body long after you roll up your mat and head home.

"When I first dreamed of my own studio, I knew I wanted it to be about community, a place where anyone could walk through the doors and practice yoga." It has most certainly become that place. Remember all the people I told you I saw coming through those doors? Donna got exactly what she wanted. It's a magnetic place that welcomes a spectrum of people from every vein of the community.

I took you on this little tour of Blue Sky because I wanted you to see firsthand what it's like to experience the companionship that yoga creates. I was once the first-timer sitting on the mat nervously, watching the doors open and close. I observed the unique group of people who end up on mats at Blue Sky Yoga, and I have come to deeply appreciate the camaraderie that yoga creates between people.

Donna loves yoga and people. She helps people love one another and themselves with yoga. It's a beautiful thing to see people who may have been worlds apart before they entered the studio come together and establish common ground, relate to one another and reach their goals by supporting each other. "You climb a mountain on your mat and you love it when others climb with you, no matter who they are!" she says with a grin.

If you need a break from your crazy life and aren't afraid of a little sweat, I think Blue Sky Yoga is the place for you. You'll find friendship and acceptance, and if nothing else, you'll get to meet Donna Ponder, the little pixie who makes the sun shine in her patch of Blue Sky.

Blue Sky Yoga is located at 2252 Tower Drive in Monroe. The diverse, capable, and friendly staff is made up of Holly Boyd, Christie Echols, Kristie Globke, Maurie Loflin, Shannon Manning, Susan Markle, Katie Morstead, Kelsie Pritchard, Brian Sivils, and Kelsey Walden. For more information and a schedule of classes, visit www.blue-sky-yoga.net.

