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Insider Profiles

Bringing Health to the Masses



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After noticing that the more affluent areas of D.C. were becoming saturated with yoga studios while many of the people in the less well-off Anacostia area were becoming obese, Sariane Leigh wanted to bring awareness to this community about ways to live healthier. So she moved east of the Anacostia River and started teaching free yoga classes while blogging about health. "I wanted to bridge the disparities between Northwest D.C. and across the river," she says.

Interestingly, Leigh found that people were hungry for a new experience, and rookie yoginis began flocking to her sessions. Leigh is a true pioneer in urban D.C., where her practice, Anacostia Yogi, has grown to become a holistic, healthy and progressive movement east of the river.

Originally from Baltimore, Leigh has been a D.C. resident since she attended University of Maryland — College Park 15 years ago. Even though Anacostia is "the part of D.C. that no one ever goes to," it may be Leigh's favorite neighborhood in the city, and she embraces it for its culture and the best views in town.

"Anywhere else, I would probably just be another yoga teacher in a studio, doing the regular fitness thing," explains Leigh. "Being in Anacostia has put an activist spin behind it." Her modern approach to health in a historic neighborhood supports the current ethnic influence and helps bridge the gap between old and new. Leigh loves seeing people who wouldn't feel comfortable or welcome in high-end yoga studios become more confident and comfortable learning yoga.

And as a former member of the Peace Corps, Leigh has been drawn to working with women dealing with unusual stresses in their lives. "I used to teach in a very affluent part of the city," she says. Now it's single moms working night shifts. Yoga can help manage stress."

But it hasn't always been easy. Leigh remembers her first classes, when only one person would show up. "My biggest success came when I received local support and grants to scale programs up. I just want to show people what this practice is and how it helped me," she says.

Now, Leigh is bringing in different types of teachers and experts. "I'd like to get to the point where we don't turn anyone away, but we have enough revenue to support other things, like healthy cooking workshops, skin care and nutrition," she says. "Yoga is the foundation, but there are other elements of your well-being we want to focus on, too."



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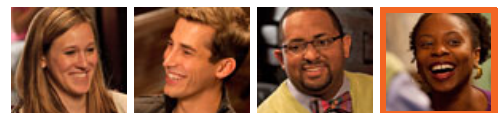


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The city is the perfect place for Leigh to accomplish her goals. "D.C. is a global village, it's just really small," she explains. "It's easy to get around, there are lots of interesting people who are open to exploring new ideas or who have traveled internationally. It's transient, a hodgepodge of identities in this really tiny space."

When Leigh isn't at her studio, you can usually find her in the Glover Park neighborhood. "It's really quaint and cute, hidden, and it's got a great community feel," she says. There, she sometimes frequents [Surfside](#), "a little tiki bar with Caribbean and Latin American cuisine and beers from all over South America."

Or she'll bike over to Capitol Hill, maybe stopping at [Eastern Market](#) to look at funky jewelry and run errands before catching a burlesque show on H Street. Most days, though, you can find Leigh biking along the Tidal Basin or doing yoga in the park. "All these green spaces are connected here so you can go from one location to the next and it's all against the backdrop of the water," she says. "Plus, there's a lot of free things to do so you don't have to depend on being indoors all the time."

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