Payton, ’96, Takes Yoga Behind Bars

By Stuart Glascock

Every Friday night Gwendolyn Payton, ’96, transitions from top-flight class-action litigator to jailhouse yoga instructor.

Her metamorphosis unfurls in her 41st-floor office in Seattle’s downtown financial district, where Payton is a partner at Lane Powell PC, one of the Pacific Northwest’s largest law firms.

First, she holsters her always-on Blackberry and swaps her professional courtroom attire for gym togs. On a 12-minute walk to the jail, Payton makes the mental leap. She temporarily sidelines thoughts of her firm’s class-action practice group, hiring, and pro-bono committees, all of which she chairs. As she leaves behind the Emerald City’s postmodern glass and steel public library, luxury retailers, and theaters, she ponders the strange, hidden subculture she’s about to penetrate.

Just beyond the urban glitz and glamour, she arrives at a drab, manila-colored, concrete fortress: the King County Correctional Facility. Built in 1986, the 20-story structure could have been designed by Kafka for the KGB. It exudes misery.

Clearing security—a gauntlet of identification checks, metal detectors, surveillance cams, remote-controlled steel doors, and guards with guns and Tasers—extracts 40 minutes. Inside the lockup, 14 edgy men in burnt-orange, jail-issued jumpsuits queue up for yoga in the clink.

For the next two hours, Payton pilots them through a taxing series of yoga postures—poses that exhaust muscles from the inside out. The men twist, lunge, and sweat—not to pump up their biceps, but to build up inner might.

In her class, the first 30 minutes “really tire them physically. It’s the best gift I can give them,” Payton says. “They will be sweating and screaming and moaning. I get immediate feedback. They are not shy.”

As the session ends, the men bask, stretched out on the floor. Their chests rise and fall in slow, relaxed rhythms. The deep breathing warms the instructor’s heart. “This is when I know it is successful,” she says.

When it’s over, the inmates file back to their multilevel cell blocks feeling less confrontational and high strung.

“I have always felt called to serve the incarcerated,” Payton says. “I am committed to this. I believe in the transformative power of yoga.”

In a big part of that service, Payton volunteers for Yoga Behind Bars, a Washington state nonprofit that places certified yoga teachers inside correctional settings. About 35 yoga teachers give free classes at seven prisons and jails.

Teaching yoga in a frenetic jail reminds Natalie Smith, executive director of Yoga Behind Bars, of emergency room triage: Many jail detainees await transfer, release, or trial and do not yet know the length of their imprisonment. And some face shock at being incarcerated. Others endure withdrawal from drugs or alcohol. Many suffer war zone–like injuries from gang fights, stabblings, gunshots, or car wrecks. Everyone looks over their shoulders.

“We are trying to keep people safe and sane in that moment,” Smith says. “We’re trying to give someone a moment of peace in their most difficult hour.”

Citing the benefits of mindfulness practices, corrections-based mental health professionals cheer Yoga Behind Bars. The program costs taxpayers nothing.

“Volunteers who provide programs to inmates are the unsung heroes in corrections,” says Commander William Hayes, spokesman for the jail.

One Seattle jail yoga student said the program should extend “all over the jail, not just one unit.” Another praised the exercise: “For a second, I was at complete peace with myself.”

Practicing yoga can spark unexpected emotions; jailed men sometimes shed tears in yoga class, Payton says. The average age in men’s jail is 37. Four of five are incarcerated for nonviolent conduct, such as property offenses and criminal trespass.

Behind bars, Payton doesn’t dig into Eastern philosophy or explore Sanskrit terms. “We’re not there to do anything but yoga,” Payton says. “The yoga allows the men to manage stress. They experience calm.”

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