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Yoga community rallies around teacher

HIGHLIGHTS

Phyllis Rollins, instructor at 8th Street Studio, finds support during breast cancer battle

Support started in Elizabeth neighborhood, spread around country



BY ALLISON FUTTERMAN

Correspondent

The students and instructors at 8th Street Studio in Elizabeth are a tight-knit group, connected through their practice of yoga. But they share another strong bond; the love and respect for their instructor (and studio owner) Phyllis Rollins. Rollins, 60, is a yoga pioneer in Charlotte. In 1993 she opened the first yoga studio here, and for years has been the only certified Iyengar instructor in the area.

Iyengar yoga focuses on alignment and precision, and was founded on the idea that yoga can benefit anyone – regardless of age, skill level or physical condition. Rollins has even traveled to India to train with the (late) founder of the method, B.K.S. Iyengar.

Currently, Rollins isn't teaching as many classes as usual. In July she found out that she had breast cancer and has been undergoing chemotherapy treatments for the past couple of months.

Those who care about Rollins wanted to help, and they have. One of 8th Street instructors, William McKee, and his wife Elizabeth, one of Rollins' longtime students, were instrumental in spearheading what was referred to as "Phyllis Fest." A group of about 40 people from the studio got together right before Rollins started chemo. They wanted her to start her journey with as much positive energy and support as possible. They also used the gathering to raise funds for medically related expenses. Several people brought homemade creations to sell, such as jewelry, pottery, clothes and honey.

McKee also set up a "GoFundMe" crowd-funding site. Although Rollins, a Cramerton resident, has insurance, much of her medical cost is not covered. Another issue affecting her financially is the time her husband Mickey has had to take off from work in order to be there for her. Dealing with an illness creates a financial burden that Rollins' close circle wants to help alleviate.

"The last thing she needs to worry about right now is money," said McKee. "We want her be able to focus on healing."

It hasn't been easy, and the treatments have caused difficult side effects. Rollins has experienced dehydration, weakness, nausea and loss of appetite.



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William McKee, yoga instructor at 8th Street Studio

“Food doesn’t taste the same,” she said, and it’s been a challenge finding foods she can tolerate. “If I find something that tastes good, it’s kind of a miracle.”

Chai tea, eggs, applesauce and miso soup are her mainstays.

She’s had to modify her teaching schedule and methods because of her lack of energy, but she still teaches a couple of classes a week. She has some predictability about what days will allow for more activity because she has found a pattern when it comes chemo.

The treatments have created a vicious cycle.

“By the time you start feeling better again, it’s time for chemo again,” she said.

She said the treatment seems to have been effective, and her tumor is no longer palpable. There are a couple of treatments left and then she’ll have to be reevaluated in order to see if surgery is necessary.

Rollins is deeply moved by the efforts to help her.

“It’s been such an incredible outpouring,” she said. “I’m so touched to my heart.”

And although the effort was started here, support has poured in from all over the country. Those from both the local and wider yoga community have “really made it possible for us to get through this,” Rollins said.

Along with support she has received, Rollins finds strength in incorporating the yoga principle of “being present” into her approach of dealing with cancer.

“The only thing I can really address is what’s going on right now,” she said. “...We have the ability to change our experience by the way we think about it. Instead of focusing on a bad possible outcome, I keep my mind on a good possible outcome.”

Another yoga principle she integrates into how she lives her life is the philosophy of being content.

“You could be doing a pose that’s not perfect and still be content,” she explained. “This is not my favorite year, but I’m content to go through it because I know in the end I’m going to be cured, to get better and to be strong again.”

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WANT TO HELP?

If you’re interested in donating to support Phyllis Rollins’ medical costs, go to <https://www.gofundme.com/phyllisr>



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