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**Excerpt from:**

## **Yoga practice blends exercise, spirituality**

*Lawn Griffiths, Tribune*

Two rolled-up rubber mats formed a purple cross, leaning against the dance studio wall. Above it hung a tapestry of Jesus the Good Shepherd and the words "Lost No More." Prayerful contemporary music radiated through the darkened room, ringed with lighted novena candles.

Instructor Elena Porter cooed softly over the music for everyone to put their hands by their sides, palms up "ready to receive God's blessing." They were encouraged to let their shoulders melt into their mats and take deep breaths, release the tension in their jaws, direct energy out their toes.

"With each inhale," she said, "know the Holy Spirit did create the breath of life. Breathe in all he has to offer."

For an hour at Center Pointe Dance Academy in Ahwatukee Foothills, Porter took her class through a rigorous program of breathing, bending, stretching, balancing and strength-building. She read a passage from 1 Peter 2:23 about how Jesus never answered back when he was insulted, and when he suffered, he never sought to get even.

Porter regularly changed music on the CDs that accompanied her teaching to drive away stress.

Before it was over, everyone was encouraged to shut off the world with small, weighted "eye bags."

"Take a moment to thank God for all the blessings you have in life," she suggested. "How fortunate you are to be here, to have the physical ability to be here, to have the wisdom to know that God would like you to take care of your body as much as your mind and your spirit. Say a prayer for all the hurting people of the world . . ."

Then it was over. The mats were rolled up and sweat wiped away — and quietly restful smiles gave way to conversations among people clearly riding highs.

"We get a lot of people who don't go to church, and they come here, and they feel very set," Porter said. "The music is ministering," whether it is hiphop, praise, country or high energy music.

"We bring in something that touches everybody, and we have fun," she said, noting that yoga poses can be difficult and challenging. "But we will say sometimes life is difficult, and all you can do is breathe. We say, "Breathe in his strength, breathe in his guidance, and they learn it here and they take it into life. It gives me goose bumps. I'm not kidding."

Another instructor, Rosie Gonzales, said the staff plans and prays together. "We see God. What does he want us to teach? . . . We come early and we pray. We want to be used by God in our work, in our teaching. We say, 'OK, God, what is your will for our practice today?' "

Debralyn and Leo Pruett and their daughter Arianna attended a class together. Some mornings, their son Quinton, an Arizona State University wrestler, takes part.

"He finds it very purposeful and spiritually enriching to his life and finally got us here," Debralyn said. "With all of his training in wrestling and emphasis on muscles, you start to get muscle-bound, but he comes here, and he's able to stretch out and gain more flexibility."

"It is amazing what it does for you," said Ahwatukee Foothills real estate agent Tracy Lenz, noting that her focus is on breathing right. "God is the breath of life. . . . It really does incorporate the spiritual side with your breathing," she said.