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This happens every day—365 days a year, 43 classes a week—and it is still not enough to keep up with demand, “It kills me to have to turn people away,” states Michele Vennard, owner and founder of Bikram Yoga San Jose. “We will keep adding classes until we get a bigger facility. I just love that more and more people are coming. Yoga is such a discovery. Once known, it changes your life.”

An interview with Michele is like a front porch visit with an old friend. Michele is dedicated not just to the business of her thriving studio but also to the spirit of it. An impassioned leader, she draws energy from life’s lessons, embracing them as wake-up calls to keep moving forward, to appreciate her many gifts, and to continue discovering joy in the ordinary. This is the spiritual undercurrent of day-to-day life at Bikram Yoga San Jose.

In her former life as Director of Neighborhood Marketing for Il Fornaio Restaurants, she was accustomed to well structured systems, methodical preparation, and extensive business planning as well as to the “do it right” work ethic that permeated the company.

While one might assume that her transition from one business to another was smooth, the truth is quite different. Michele recalls, “While I was working at Il Fornaio, my mother was diagnosed with a virulent form of Alzheimer’s Disease in which deterioration is rapid. She was 49. None of us knew how quickly our mother would decline, but I decided to devote as much time as I could to being with her, and I’m so very glad I did.” “Time” turned out to be a year and a half of red-eye flights between San Jose and Chicago. Seeing the progressive deterioration engendered in Michele a heightened appreciation for the “ordinary” moments in everyday life.

Extreme stress, physical and mental, is common for terminal care-givers. After her mother’s passing, a close friend encouraged her to enroll in yoga for therapy. “I immediately started to feel better”, Michele explains, “and I felt lifted from the constant grief.”

During a flight to a family reunion, Michele’s life-altering inspiration was born. “I saw a brochure that introduced Bikram’s Yoga College of India to potential instructor candidates. Upon my arrival, I informed my father that I would be attending

the class and planned to quit my job to open a Bikram Yoga studio in San Jose.”

Michele laughs at the memory. “My family thought I was crazy! Give up my career, and attend the grueling nine week teacher’s training? And Bikram Yoga is performed in a room heated to 105°F. To say that it’s intense and demanding is an understatement.”

Using her business savvy, during the next eight months Michele prepared for her new career before concluding her work at Il Fornaio. She focused on self-realization, finding an increased sense of peace and self-appreciation and the ability to live life in the present, detached from worries of the past or future.

Bikram Yoga San Jose’s opening included a ribbon cutting ceremony and a blessing by a Hospice Minister. From an enrollment of 22 six years ago, membership has grown to over 14,000, gaining more than 200 new members a month. Each day, approximately 200 students attend classes. The astounding success speaks to the quality and delivery of the offerings at Bikram Yoga San Jose.

Michele teaches only three to four classes a week now, but she attends class daily. She has competed in several yoga competitions, recently taking 2nd place in the Northern California Yoga Asana Competition. “I really think of the studio as a restaurant. We believe in great quality, good service, and cleanliness; instead of great food, we serve the highest quality Bikram Yoga. Not only is prosperity derived from this formula, but the bonus is the friends you make because you are so involved.”

Michele’s enthusiasm is contagious. Over the phone, she explains that yoga was a tool that saved her life. “Really,” she says. “I knew it would help me physically, but I did not expect it to overcome so much mental stress. I was feeling more peace, and I knew others could benefit, too.”

“It is so amazing,” states Christine, a six year member. “I am so happy and surprised at how strong I have become in more ways than the physical.

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