

Cause You Should Know: The Africa Yoga Project



APRIL 10TH, 2014
POSTED IN **HEALTH + FITNESS** BY **MEGHAN BLALOCK**

When it comes to charity organizations, every now and then we come across something so unique and impactful that we feel compelled to share it with our readers. The **Africa Yoga Project** is one of those organizations.

MORE: 3 Easy Yoga Poses to Do Every Day

As you might guess from the title, the AYP works to bring yoga to African residents who might not otherwise have access to it. Co-founded in 2007 years ago by longtime **Baptiste Yoga** teacher **Paige Elenson**, who still serves as the organization's director, the AYP focuses on the slums of Kenya, bringing yoga to people who largely live in abject poverty.

How It Came About: "The idea of the organization was manifested on a family trip to Kenya; I was on a safari with my family when I saw a group of acrobats doing handstands in the bush," Paige tells StyleCaster. "I got out of the jeep without hesitation and joined them. I showed them some yoga poses and they loved it. They wanted more and continued to reach out to me once I went back to New York.

After some thought, I returned to Kenya to teach them yoga. I stayed with a few girls in the slums of Kenya. This was the first time I really experienced this extreme of poverty and it completely opened my eyes. I wanted to help. I started teaching yoga and had students traveling hours to get to my classes. This is when I decided to train teachers and then pay them for teaching classes. I wanted to train and employ the youth in Kenya."

Why Yoga: The gut response to helping people living in adject poverty is often material: food, water, clothing, and all the other basic necessities for life are typically the first kind of aid given to any people living in underprivileged communities. But according to **Bethany Lyons**, yoga teacher, co-founder of Manhattan's **Lyons Den Power Yoga studio**, and mentor in AYP's teacher training programs, yoga has material effects and beyond.

"It's this whole idea that instead of giving a person a fish, you're teaching them to fish," Lyons tells StyleCaster. "We're not just going to send food or supplies; we're going to give you leadership skills. I think yoga has a long-term affect that brings real possibility as opposed to a short term band-aid. For people living in abject poverty, the biggest problem isn't that there's no water, floors, etc. It's really that there's no hope that anything can change; there is no sight beyond, no possibility for them. They don't see anything beyond what they know."

Yoga, according to Paige, gives Kenyans the power to see possibility and ways out of there current living situation.

"I believe yoga is the greatest service to give someone to find what is inside of them, to see what is possible and provide the tools to transform their own life," Paige tells StyleCaster. "If you are willing to commit and do the work, you can make a change."

Economic Benefits: Beyond the mental health benefits of yoga, giving teacher trainings to young people in Kenya offers proven economic benefits: it not only gives them jobs as yoga teachers, but gives them the skill set to inspire other young yoga students to then pursue their own financial independence.

"Our biggest impact is that we are alleviating poverty by creating a market for yoga. There is a high level of poverty amongst the youth in Kenya. When I realized this, it is one of the main reasons I created the organization," Paige tells us. "I wanted to create jobs through yoga. To date, we have trained more than 210 teachers for free. We employ more than 98 teachers that earn a living wage of at least \$125 per month. These 98 teachers are reaching 6,000 people a week through the 350 free outreach classes. Even more, we are creating leaders by giving the youth an opportunity to step into their greatness and create a sustainable living."

How You Can Help: While it might seem like only trained yoga instructors can really help build AYP and impact the lives of those they help, there are actually several ways normal everyday folks can contribute. AYP has ambassador and safari programs where you can go to Africa for a couple weeks to help out on a variety of projects based on the needs of the local communities (not all of them are yoga-focused).

If you do belong to a yoga community, you can sign up to lead donation-based classes to raise funds for AYP; you can also sign up to mentor an AYP teacher, like Bethany Lyons does. "The mentor program creates a bridge between our aspiring Kenyan teachers and individuals all over the world," Paige explains. "It supports each Kenyan teacher's outreach salary and professional development, fostering dynamic cultural exchange between yoga teachers worldwide."