

Perfecting posture

Area woman searches for ways to eliminate back pain

BY KRISTINA PETERSON
DAILY NEWS STAFF WRITER

Esther Gokhale felt so much back pain that during the night she would walk around the block every two hours for relief.

The pregnant Palo Alto resident had already had one surgery, and doctors were urging her to undergo another. And after her daughter's birth, she was told she would not be able to have any more children, due to her body's fragility.

Twenty years later, Gokhale, now a mother of three, runs her own wellness center just off California Avenue in Palo Alto, where thousands of students have learned to improve their posture and reduce back pain.

Launched this weekend, an exhibit at downtown art gallery Hot Mango Pickle displays the photographs taken by Gokhale that she uses to teach students how to mimic the stances of populations with low frequency of back pain.

"There is a natural, optimal way to do everyday activities," Gokhale said on Friday, just before the launch of her exhibit, "A Positive Stance: Healing through Art."

"When you do things the way your body was designed, it has a therapeutic effect rather than creating wear and tear," she said.

Gokhale began her own transformation 20 years ago in Paris, where she studied on and off for a decade with Noelle Perez, an advocate of the "anthropologically informed" theory Gokhale has systematized and streamlined for an American audience after her own symptoms vanished.

Gokhale's basic principles for proper alignment center around tipping the pelvis forward, elongating the neck, opening the shoulders and reducing the spine's curvature in the back — a theory developed through years of traveling to research traditional cultures with low occurrences of back pain.



Victor Maccharoli / Daily News

Esther Gokhale took photos during a four-continent search to research tribes with low occurrence of back pain. She believes the pictures, which are in an art exhibit, can help people mimic good posture.

"Village Africans, tribal Brazilians, Greek statues and young children the world over all keep their behinds truly behind them," she said.

Equally important to Gokhale's teaching method is the practice of surrounding students with images of healthy stances, taken by Gokhale on her numerous trips to Africa, Brazil and India during the past decade.

"There is a lot of research showing that unbeknownst to ourselves, we mimic each other constantly," said Gokhale, who studied biochemistry at Harvard and Princeton and took anatomy classes at Stanford University.

Born in India, the half-Indian, half-Dutch Gokhale also speaks a dozen languages. She even picked up Portuguese in two weeks before traveling to Brazil, where she would hop on the bus and ride it to find villages to study.

Her technique, she said, is "not some way I made up. I'm just describing the way it is."

More than 2,000 students, including roughly 50 physicians, have passed through the Esther Gokhale Wellness Center, where Gokhale also uses hands-on instruction and verbal explanations to help her patrons transform their stances.

Improved posture not only helps reduce back

pain, but can also improve organ health, circulation and mental health, she said.

One student began practicing with Gokhale at the age of 85, with four fractured vertebrae. He was in great pain, despite medication.

"Within weeks he had gotten rid of his cane and ceased to need pain medication," Gokhale said.

Her Web site highlights a string of endorsements from locals, including Dr. Salwan Abezzi from the Palo Alto Medical Foundation, Dr. John Adler, a Stanford professor of neurosurgery, tennis champion Billie Jean King and Nobel Prize winning author J.M. Coetzee.

And Gokhale has one further reason to adapt her method, outlined in her just-published book, "Eight Steps to a Pain-Free Back."

"A sleek and tall abdomen protects the back," she said, "and also makes people look very svelte."

Gokhale's photos will be on display at Hot Mango Pickle, located at 539 Bryant Street, until Feb. 1.

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Bayswater crossing is closed

DAILY NEWS STAFF REPORTS

Caltrain construction closes the railroad grade crossing at Bayswater Avenue in Burlingame this weekend.

The closure, which will last through Monday, is a part of the year-long project to reconstruct the Burlingame

Caltrain station platforms and has been rescheduled from last weekend. The closure was postponed due to weather conditions.

During the weekend construction, motorists and pedestrians will detour around the closure by using Howard or Peninsula avenues. The track will be open at 5 a.m. Monday in time for regular weekday service.

For more information, visit www.caltrain.com/Burlingame.

BRIEFS

County foundation pays tribute to doctor

The San Mateo County Health Foundation will pay tribute to Dr. Rodney Kirk, former chief of staff and chief of otolaryngology at the San Mateo Medical Center.

Kirk served nearly 40 years in San Mateo County and was also active in international medicine. The Rodney L. Kirk Clinic is located in the Palestinian West Bank.

Kirk, who died Dec. 28, will be memorialized with an examination room at the center named in his honor. The foundation will donate \$25,000 to the center.

The room is located in the Ron

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