





# YOGA WARRIOR

By Erynn Dalton

Photography by Jeremy Pritchett

**“DO I LOOK** ok? I never wear makeup,” says the strikingly beautiful, exceedingly down-to-earth (and recently made up) Molly Birkholm, anxious about her upcoming photo shoot with Blindfold Magazine.

Like many before her, Molly didn’t set out to change the world. “I was an investment banker living in New York and I had just gotten out of college as a financial analyst working really crazy hours. My focus was banking, making money and spending intense hours — at least 80 hours per week, sometimes more — at work.”

Then, in 2000, her life was forever changed. While riding in a taxi in New York City, the taxi struck another vehicle in an intersection, causing a devastating accident that killed the taxi driver and left Molly severely injured.

“I fractured my skull, broke my sternum and fractured my spine. The cab driver died — he was actually decapitated — and I was trapped in the car with him. I was in and out of consciousness, which kind of saved me. I

remember people telling me ‘keep your eyes open, keep your eyes open,’ and I just couldn’t. Eventually I woke up in the hospital. It took me years to put my physical body back together and also deal with the trauma of witnessing someone die in such a violent way.”

During her time in physical therapy, Molly’s mother suggested she begin practicing yoga, sensing that it would help her recover not just physically, but emotionally, as well.

“I was having trouble sleeping — flashbacks and nightmares, typical tension and stress from recovering from an accident,” Molly said. She followed her mother’s suggestion and began practicing yoga, and the change was instantaneous. “I was always drawn spiritually to things, but I never encountered something that really made sense.”

“I grew up in a Catholic tradition, and I would read the Bible and think ‘how come they’re having all the spiritual experiences and I’m not?’ And then I would look at the nuns and think ‘they’re definitely not!’ \*laughs\* That was my limited encounter of spirituality in the suburban Midwest, so it wasn’t like I was in a Catholic monastery where people really do have very spiritual experiences.”

“So instantly when I started doing yoga, it was like a before and after day — everything changed in one day. And I started practicing all the time. I

got really, really deep not just into the practice of yoga but yoga philosophy. And it just all clicked.”

It all clicked for Molly so well, in fact, that once she received her insurance settlement from the accident, she made the decision to travel to Asia and study yoga, much to the chagrin of her family.

“My parents were devastated. My mom was crying as I left at the airport. They were worried about me, but at the same time, I think they knew that I had to go,” Molly said.

Molly’s odyssey throughout Asia ended up lasting three years, during which she traveled to India, Bhutan, Burma, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Thailand. Molly studied at the Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Ashram in Neyyar Dam, Kerala, India and studied meditation at a Buddhist monastery in Bhutan in the Himalayas.

As life changing as her accident was, it was her experiences in Asia that completely and permanently altered her perspective. “It was a powerful journey for me. I had grown up in a comfortable way where you don’t encounter the true, true suffering of the world. I remember a day in India when I was driving from one town to another and I saw these people — I thought they were sleeping on the side of the road, and they were actually dead from an ongoing drought. I quickly realized that all these women were begging for water on the side of the road because their children were dying from lack of water,” she said.

“We always have these moments where your whole paradigm shifts and falls apart. I remember that was the day that I realized that I had to devote the rest of my life to alleviating the suffering of other people. It was all I wanted to do. I had no idea what shape that would take.”

The shape of Molly’s work crystallized after she had returned from her journey in Asia and moved to Miami, Florida, with her new husband. Despite all of her yoga training, Molly did not feel that her path was to teach in a studio. Then her cousin, a doctor at the V.A. Hospital in Miami, asked if Molly would consider teaching a yoga class for veterans in wheelchairs. Molly quickly agreed and soon after, she was asked to expand her role to teach meditation in a residential three-month, Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) treatment program for veterans.

“There was one vet who hadn’t slept more than two hours per night since the Vietnam War and was suddenly sleeping six to eight hours per night. It helped with chronic pain, anxiety and depression. It was amazing,” Molly said.

Things took off for Molly and the V.A.’s yoga and meditation program from that point forward. She began teaching a form of guided meditation to veterans in the substance abuse treatment program and the severe mental health unit.

“One of the main things we teach is a guided form of meditation called iRest Yoga Nidra, a secular form of an ancient yoga practice proven clinically to be one of the most effective things for trauma,” Molly said. “It’s great because silence can be very hard for someone with trauma, whereas with Yoga Nidra they have a gentle guidance through their physical and mental experience, so they can feel safe with whatever emotions are coming up. It’s been one of the things the military has gotten behind the most.”

The success of Molly’s yoga and meditation classes quickly got the attention of the V.A.’s research department, which applied for and received a small grant to study the effects of yoga and meditation from the National Institute of Health. From there, a much larger grant of \$250,000 was received from the Department of Defense. This was the first grant of its kind ever awarded for the study of Complementary Alternative Medicine and its effects on the treatment of disorders experienced by veterans.

“In long-term trauma, and even short term, the brain changes. The amygdala grows and the hippocampus shrinks, making people more emotionally reactive, keeping them always in the moment of the trauma. They can’t place it in a normal context,” Molly explains.

“With yoga and meditation, the inverse occurs. Meditation triggers the relaxation response — the amygdala shrinks and the hippocampus grows. When people talk about leaving a yoga class and they feel so fully in the present moment, they’ve moved from the sympathetic nervous symptom (fight or flight mode) to the parasympathetic nervous system where they can really feel that sense of peace. And in terms of the brain with long-term [yoga and meditation] practitioners, the hippocampus has grown. That’s why they’re able to experience the present moment instead of being drawn into the past or being worried about the future.”

In four years of teaching yoga and meditation to over one thousand veterans, Molly has seen undeniably positive results. She recalls one of the veterans from her class, a young man in his early 20s who had done two tours in Iraq, who responded particularly well.

A gentleman Molly worked with was a Vietnam veteran living in Miami. “He thought he was signing up for a ‘medication’ class instead of



“Sometimes when I meditate, flashbacks come to me of helicopters circling and the time we accidentally killed a woman and her little son. Normally, this would have sent me into a breakdown. Now, I am learning to observe the experience, learn the lessons from it. Meditation helps me find the part of my soul that is still peaceful.”

- Rick, Enduring Freedom Vet



‘meditation’ class. \*laughs\* He was incredible. I had to convince him to stay in class that first day. Very quickly he found tremendous changes in how he felt — being able to sleep through the night. This is a man who claimed he hadn’t slept all night since the war — waking up all hours with nightmares and severe anxiety. He had become estranged from his family and had issues with work. Meditation transformed his whole life,” Molly said.

“He became a role model for other vets, because he could speak so authentically about how meditation had helped with the nightmares, flashbacks and insomnia. Eventually he became a meditation teacher.”

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In spite of so many success stories, Molly is careful to point out that the Complementary Alternative Medicine program does not exist alone, but is used in conjunction with other, more traditional treatment programs, including physical therapy, medication, talk therapy, exposure therapy and substance abuse treatment.

Since the success of the Complementary Alternative Medicine program, Molly has partnered with three other women (Robin Carnes, Karen Soltes and Col. Pat Lillis) in order to expand its outreach to other veterans and active service members through a non-profit organization called Warriors at Ease. The mission of the organization is to offer yoga and meditation classes to military communities around the world, with a strong focus on those affected by combat-stress, PTSD, and trauma, by training and deploying certified mind-body professionals to settings where they can help service members, veterans and their families.

“People were coming to us [Birkholm, Carnes, Soltes and Lillis] individually and asking ‘How can I do this work? How can I teach yoga and meditation in the military?’ So eventually we developed best practices — everything based on science and medical, factual evidence. And together we developed a training program for yoga and meditation teachers to learn how to teach trauma-sensitive yoga. It’s evolved — we have a seven-week webinar series and a one-week in person training where they learn adaptive yoga — how to teach yoga to someone with traumatic injuries. Through these, they really get hands on training — they all take on different injuries — one day they have to wear a helmet, the next they tie up a leg. They really teach each other.”

Warriors at Ease, according to Molly, has been an enormous success and continues to expand its reach. “Now we have all these amazing yoga teachers branching out to the V.A.’s and military bases. We have people deployed in Iraq and

Afghanistan, we have people in Germany. We have people out there doing the work now and branching out in huge ways. We’ve trained over 500 teachers on how to teach yoga and meditation to the military. It’s a lot. But, at the same time, there’s 22.5 million more vets in this country, so there’s still so much work to do.”

The military’s view of yoga and meditation has evolved substantially since Molly first started teaching classes to veterans in Miami. “When I first started in 2007, it was nothing but adversity — at every turn we had to prove ourselves and fight with any minimal amount of clinical research that had been done to say ‘Look, this is working.’ Getting outtake surveys from the vets and things like that to prove ourselves,” Molly says. “Now it’s the opposite. Now we have the military calling and asking if we can start a program somewhere else or asking if we have teachers at a particular V.A. hospital or base. They ask how can they get a program started where they are, or how they can get their mental health staff trained in meditation so they can share that with their patients.”

“Also we’re partnering with iPads for Soldiers and loading on four yoga and meditation apps for soldiers deployed in Iraq and Afghanistan and for the ones that are afraid to ask for help. They’re downloadable for free on the Internet. We’re also creating guides to relaxation and we’d like to create a free app for soldiers and vets who aren’t able to move past the stigma of receiving mental health care. It’s growing a lot now. It’s gotten to the point that we’re having to really expand to meet the needs.”

The irony that Molly’s success with yoga was found within the military, an organization whose principles are seemingly incongruent to yoga’s, has not been lost on her. However, her view is as surprising as it is sensible.

“I have to say that I learned more about yoga and meditation from war veterans and soldiers than I did anywhere else. When you have such severe trauma, are you able to keep your peace, even in the midst of war? Even in the midst of the biggest adversity and trauma? And the way that the soldiers are able to boil down the essence of truth and find the inherent wisdom in the face of life’s most dramatic adversity, I’m incredibly inspired to continue doing the work and bringing it to them because it’s amazing. I always tell the vets that the depth to which you have suffered in life is the height to which you can experience peace. And I totally believe it, because I see people come in totally broken, shattered from the wounds of war, and they are able to find such tremendous depth within themselves and such a reservoir of peace. They teach me all the time.”

