

CAMBRIDGE

Activists' a.m. mantra: Our bodies, our beliefs

Political, personal meet in yoga class

By Danielle Dreilinger
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

Activists in the 1970s declared that the personal was political. But even they might not have imagined the Eviction Free Zone yoga class in Cambridge, where the two spheres come together with a bang.

Every Saturday morning, a small group gathers to practice yoga and engage in housing activism. While the combination sounds odd, the unique class allows political activists to connect their bodies with their beliefs.

Teacher Louise Dunlap, 67, proposed the concept to the Eviction Free Zone, a Cambridge-based tenants' rights organization, in 1994. The \$10 class fee would benefit the organization, Dunlap would donate her time, and anyone facing evic-

tion could attend for free.

Bill Cavellini, an Eviction Free Zone steering committee member and cab driver, remembers being "delighted" with the idea. His working-class upbringing had led him to believe that yoga was only for the leisure class.

Nine years later, "It's worked out according to my wildest dreams," Dunlap says. The class gives the tenants' group \$1,000 to \$2,000 per year and has "really helped people who were feeling terribly, terribly stressed."

People like Jo Cole, an Eviction Free Zone volunteer who started experiencing back pain when her own grueling two-year eviction struggle began in 1999. Although she had attended the class from the start, it took on deeper meaning for her, easing her physical tension and providing emotional support.

Eviction and affordability have touched other regular attendees as well. One core member of the group had to leave Massachusetts when she lost her job. Dunlap struggled to stay in afford-

able Cambridge rentals for years until she finally bought into a limited-equity cooperative. Now, teaching the class is her main act of housing activism.

Dunlap advertises largely via word of mouth at meetings and events, and posts fliers in the Harvest Co-op Markets in Central Square. Two recent classes drew nine participants, community activists all, largely older women, mostly regulars. They eschew trendy tight togs in favor of sweats, loose jeans, and activist T-shirts that say things like "Our government is housing its MISSILES better than it's housing its PEOPLE."

Far from the polished serenity and



blond wood of high-rent yoga studios, the Eviction Free class uses a linoleum-floored studio at Cambridge Community Television, which gives Dunlap a cut rate. At two early January classes, they had to clean up painting supplies before they could start.

Despite the conditions, a relaxed camaraderie prevailed in a December class.

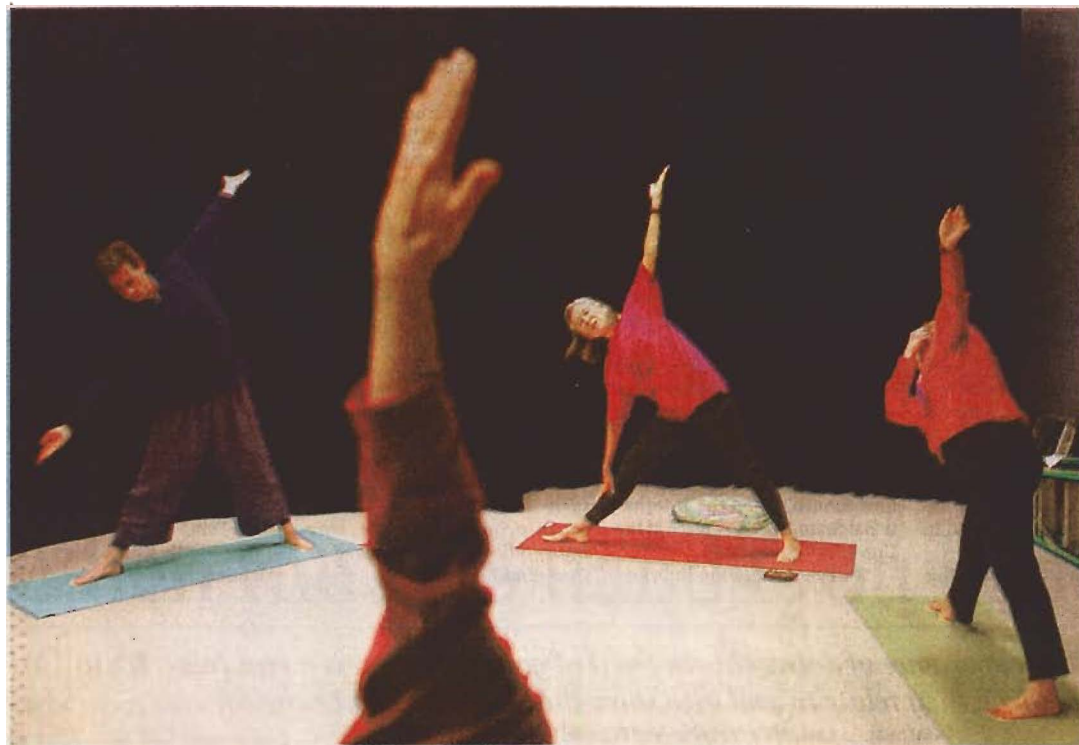
As the students arranged their mats in an egalitarian circle, a canine participant, Mary Leno's small dog, Desi, chased his tail and chomped on a sock. "She teaches us the dog pose," Leno quipped.

When the students check in with each other, they discuss not only physical aches but housing pains. Chris Connaire has a bum right hip, and she's trying to help an ex-prisoner find a one-bedroom or studio apartment for \$1,000 or less.

The class occasionally engages in direct action. After the Dec. 18 class, a contingent traveled to North Cambridge to protest a landlord's eviction of tenants in Lawrence.

There is a key difference between Eviction Free Yoga and the average yoga class: Dunlap and her students don't focus solely on self-improvement. Instead, Dunlap finds that yoga frees up energy for activism. "Yoga is about getting in touch with oneself, but it's also about getting involved with community," she says.

Practicing yoga, people "can actually feel more powerful."



PHOTOS BY ERIK JACOBS FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Instructor Louise Dunlap (top photo), who struggled for years to stay in affordable Cambridge rentals, holds a position during her yoga class, which helps housing activists and those facing eviction reduce stress. Joseph Donnelly (above and left photos), Louise Dunlap, and Jo Cole also take positions. Class proceeds benefit the Eviction Free Zone, a tenants group.