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## Meet Monica

One amazing  
yoga journey

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# Contentment, achievement, self-fulfilment: the journey of a lifetime

with **Monica Burton**

Throughout my life I have always had a passion for learning, a need to be constantly occupying my mind and body, but little did I know that when I left Jamaica in 1953, my adventure in the UK would fulfil my life in ways I never dreamed.

Aged 18, I arrived in Middlesex to start my nursing degree, specialising in cancer and radiotherapy. After leaving nursing in the late 1960s, I started attending yoga classes. Then, my greatest adventure began. After completing the BWY Diploma and the City & Guilds, I became a Diploma Certified Trainer in 1984. After consistently achieving A+ awards, in 1988, the BWY asked me to join as a Diploma Course Tutor (DCT).

My first diploma course in 1988 saw the registration of the first blind student, Michelle. The BWY were concerned about the logistical challenges. I remember saying, 'I cannot say no to this student because she is blind just as much as the BWY could not refuse me for being non-white'. Michelle was a wonderful inspiration to us all.

My biggest challenge arose when I started teaching special needs students – Ricardo was deaf, dumb and blind. We worked out our own communication system, I wore the same perfume and the same texture clothing every day so he could recognise me. I am grateful for the learning experience with all my special needs students over 13 years.

Whilst a young mother, I worked two nights a week in the stroke centre of the local geriatric hospital, this provided valuable knowledge and experience which was to form the basis of the, yet to be conceived, Yoga for the 3rd Age course.

In the early 1990s, I became a BWY Verifier and, in 2011, achieved the Level 3 Assessors Award, and was the first National In-Service Training Officer (NISTO).

It was in 2005 when my greatest piece of work was born. The BWY asked me to write Yoga for the 3rd Age (Y3A), which now forms the backbone of the Gentle Years Yoga programme. Y3A is a lifeline for ageing communities. It highlights how the body changes as we age, how to cope with strokes, osteoporosis and many age-related conditions, and how to spot the early signs. Building



rapport amongst the group is vital as this encourages students to open up and uncovers any underlying issues that may be present. Each student learns how to risk assess their own health and how to interact with medical professionals. It has proved to be incredibly successful with ongoing requests for the course from doctors. I receive updates from students who have benefitted from the course, Helen Rich from Lahinch Yoga in Ireland is a regular contributor, with another becoming a teacher at the Royal Hospital Chelsea.

The London Yoga Festival was the brainchild of John Parry and myself. The BWY Board were far from positive about our radical idea initially. We organised the first ever festival in the early 1980s, it slowly blossomed into the renowned event it is today. I organised the BWY's part of the Millennial Show at the Royal Albert Hall, plus a big show in Battersea Park. Janet Southall always commented that my hard work put London on the map not just for yoga, but also for the BWY.

By then, I was running back to back diploma courses, they were so incredibly popular, around 60 people registered



for each course, but we could only take 13. I spent many years teaching yoga in schools and relaxation classes for secondary students in preparation for their 8+ exams.

My yoga life has been filled with richly rewarding challenges. I am proud to have trained the highest number of teachers and ran the greatest number of courses for the BWY. I was the only ethnic kid on the block for many years and I received nothing but warmth and care from everyone. I am pleased to see how much the BWY has grown and how multiculturally diverse it has become.

My advice for anyone starting yoga; be the best you can be, do your own thing, don't copy, because it's not your truth until you've tried it, make it your own truth, find your own truth.

My yoga philosophy is about letting go of rigidity rather than striving to be flexible, once you let go, the flexibility will come. Adopt the postures to suit your body, only go to where your body can get to – our body is the only instrument we have, so play the best tune you can on it.

There has not been one single course, event or retreat I have not enjoyed, I have met some amazing people on my journey of life. I am very lucky and very happy – I am happy to be who and where I am now.

Monica is a BWY Verifier and still keeps fully active, as well as running the Y3A course.

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Written by Marie Castle, Freelance Writer

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