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COMMUNITY NEWS

Merokean raising funds for quake-ravaged Japan

By David Weingrad



David Weingrad/Herald

Mariko Fusillo, a Merrick resident and owner of Harmony Yoga & Dance Healing Arts Center on Merrick Road in Wantagh, will hold a "Day of Healing Event for Japan and Earth" fundraiser to benefit her native Japan this Sunday.

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Fusillo said she has friends and former students in Japan who are still missing.

On Sunday, June 12, Fusillo will host a "Day of Healing for Japan and Earth" fundraiser at the Wantagh Memorial Congregational Church/Pixie Pre-School. All proceeds will go to the Japanese American Association, which will send funds directly to the Miyagi prefecture of Japan in the Tohoku region, where the earthquake and tsunami disasters have hit the hardest. The event will feature live music, and, according to Fusillo, will be a "peaceful and nurturing" event.

"It's going to be fun," she said. "But it's more focusing on healing. I want people to have peace of mind. If you feel the peace for yourself, everyone can see the bigger view."

An accomplished dancer and actress, Fusillo has performed in many musicals, and even on Broadway after she was casted by Tokyo Can Can, an original Japanese production company. She has taught yoga and dance

When Mariko Fusillo of Merrick first heard that a magnitude 9.0 earthquake had struck her native Japan on March 11, she immediately became concerned for her family.

Fusillo, 51, lived in Tokyo until she was 34 years old, before immigrating to the United States. After this year's horrific quake, it took her two hours to get in touch with her family when she learned that Tokyo was unharmed. Her father, mother, sister and brother were safe.

"It was so scary," said Fusillo. "In 10 minutes, it came and everything was gone. I was so worried."

Fusillo, who has lived in Merrick for 17 years, owns and operates a yoga and fitness center called Harmony Yoga & Dance Healing Arts Center on Merrick Road in Wantagh.

The earthquake, which has been classified as the most powerful known earthquake to ever hit Japan, killed more than 15,000 people and left some 8,000 missing. The quake, which struck the Tohoku region of Japan, triggered a tsunami with waves more than 10 stories high. In addition, the tsunami caused nuclear accidents that resulted in the evacuation of hundreds of thousands of people from their homes. Although her family is safe,

for more than 30 years in Tokyo and the U.S. After meeting her husband, Iwao, in 1990 while visiting Manhattan, the two fell in love and married in 1994. It was then that she decided to make the permanent move, leaving her friends and family behind in Tokyo. It was a challenge for Fusillo at first. Although she could speak English, she was hindered by a thick Japanese accent. "Of course, it's a different way of speaking," she said. "But I'm getting adjusted."

She continued to study theater and dance until 1999, when she began focusing solely on yoga and opened her fitness center.

Fusillo's philosophy differs from most yoga instructors. She said that while most people focus on the physical aspect of the art, she preaches the healing aspect of yoga. "Life is always changing," she said. "Practicing the discipline of yoga really helped me to go to the next step of myself. The healing comes from this type of awareness."

"Everything is connected," she continued. "Through individual peace comes world peace."

She classifies her art as "yoga therapy." She teaches pregnancy yoga, often traveling to hospitals to instruct pregnant women or women who have recently given birth. She also teaches yoga to individuals with special needs, or to individuals who have fallen ill. She teaches her art at local libraries and schools, including the Brookside School in North Merrick, as well as local elementary schools.

Her father, Shigeru Yokote, was a Chinese astrology master, Fusillo said. He introduced her to the laws of nature and the universe as a child, which first got her interested in yoga. Her mother, Yoshiko Yokote, was also a big influence, she said.

Fusillo said that over the years, people have begun to trust her because of her experience and keen intuition. Since 1999, she has slowly accumulated a large and dedicated client base.

"She's very, very intuitive," said Laura Rosa, a Wantagh resident who regularly attends yoga classes with Fusillo. "She can look at you and know how you feel. I don't prefer to go to any other yoga class." Rosa said that she won a raffle for free yoga classes with Fusillo seven years ago. She hasn't stopped going. "Even though she's the type of person who knows so much, she's always interested in what other people have to say, and what other people are doing," she said. "I don't think I've ever met anybody who was less self-involved."

Fusillo said that on that fateful March day when the quake hit Japan, she was at home. A friend called her and told her to turn on the television. Although what she was witnessing was devastating, she said that it motivated her to act. "I wanted to do something that I can do," she said. "I wish I could go right to them there. I want to do that, but I can't."

The result was a fundraiser. She began organizing the event shortly after the earthquake hit, and has been trying to spread the word ever since. She said the amount of support she has received from her customers, and from members of the community, has astounded her. "I'm so impressed with them," she said. "Even though they don't know Japan, they felt very compassionate about it. I was really happy."

Although Fusillo said she hopes to raise a great deal of money, she said it's about more than that. She said her overall goal is to change the mindset of how people view the world. "Intuitively, we need something to change," she said. "It's not only Japanese people; everyone in the world has to change. All over the world there are natural disasters. It is not only one country. We need to start thinking more about each other."

In addition to yoga and dance, there will be live performances by Nadine Scharman on the flute, Kenji Kawaguchi on the shakuhachi bamboo flute and Aya Terki on the cello.

The event will run from 12:30 to 5:30 p.m. and have an entrance fee of \$30, and donations can also be made by sending a check made payable to the "Japanese American Association of NY" to Fusillo's fitness center at

Harmony Yoga & Dance, Healing Arts Center, 3050 Merrick Road, Wantagh, N.Y., 11793. You can email the center at Harmonyyoga@optonline.net. Fusillo said she tries to visit Japan at least once a year to see her family. She has not been back since the earthquake hit, but hopes to return in the fall. Although she admits she's nervous to see the destruction and horror that await her in her homeland, she still tries to look on the bright side.

"A positive way to think is, how many people can connect and how many people have the power to recover?" she said. "That's the power that we need to have in the next generation."

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