

gimme shelter

San Francisco homeless
find relief through yoga.

LUPE WAS UNDER a lot of stress when she started doing yoga in 2006. She'd recently become homeless and was living in a shelter in San Francisco. She was job hunting. She was working on her bachelor's degree. Her chronic back pain hardly seemed worth mentioning.

When the shelter, St. Anthony Foundation's Marian Residence for Women, began offering yoga once a week, Lupe (who asked that her last name not be used) decided to give it a shot.

Yoga class became the one place where she could forget her worries. She found herself lowering her guard. Sometimes she even let herself fully relax—so much so that she'd fall asleep during Savasana (Corpse Pose).

After taking a class, she says, "I felt better, could think more clearly, and my

back pain was far less.” What she learned from this experience has had a lasting effect: Now a college graduate, Lupe lives on her own and does yoga every night before going to sleep.

The St. Anthony Foundation began offering yoga, relaxation training, and acupuncture at its free medical clinic in March 2006. “When we were just practicing straight medicine, we found we weren’t addressing the underlying trauma in the people who visit us,” says clinic director Ana Valdes.

Foundation staff soon realized that holistic therapies would be useful for residents of the women’s shelter as well. Valdes estimates that several hundred people have participated in the foundation’s yoga classes to date.

Yoga teacher Alice Tarkeshi, who volunteers her time at the shelter, says she’s seen the class change her students in subtle ways. They sit up taller and they seem calmer. They also smile more readily and are more likely to hug one another. Tarkeshi teaches gentle asanas, includ-

ing seated twists, forward bends, and supported backbends, sometimes using chairs as props to help students who have limited mobility.

The goal of the class, she says, is to help the women relax and become comfortable in their own bodies. “I always remind them that no matter where they are,” she says, “they can come back to their breath.” HEATHER BOERNER