

A daring act *of* balance

Instructor Lauren Koehler, centre, Shannon Gowland, left, and Lindsay Egan relax on paddleboards before moving into yoga poses at Laurel Creek Conservation Area in Waterloo.



Lauren Koehler benefits as much as her students from the SUP Yoga classes she guides at Waterloo's Laurel Creek

BY DAWN MATHESON
PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALISHA TOWNSEND

The tranquility of being on water, the physical demands of a stand-up paddle board, combined with the calming effect of yoga might be just what the doctor ordered at a time when so many people are struggling with anxiety.

You read that right — yoga taught on a paddleboard out on the open water.

Lauren Koehler, 30, who kicked off just such a class in partnership with the Waterloo Paddling Club last summer, is familiar with the effects of anxiety and the search for life balance. A Mental Health Risk Index published in 2017 by Ipsos indicates

41 per cent of Canadians are at high risk of developing a mental-health illness.

“That was me completely — that is me, what I’m working with every day,” Koehler says.

Her confession comes as the daring yogi balances on a tipsy paddleboard, guiding a group of shaky-legged women through Warrior pose in the middle of Waterloo’s Laurel Creek on a sunny afternoon.

Stand-up paddle boarding (SUP) is one of the fastest-growing sports in North America. Combine the SUP trend with one of the oldest — yoga — plus the all-around benefits of being in nature, and a lot of enthusiastic participants are ready to get

onboard.

Koehler’s 90-minute class started with a short paddle out on the knees before the four participants anchored semi-circle around Koehler for a cross-legged sit “to get grounded and connected to the water.”

The core strength and balance required on the board meet participants at their own level: the unstable base allows seasoned yogis to find challenges in the most familiar of postures; beginners to both SUP and yoga can modify positions to focus on subtle core stabilization.

Each posture builds in intensity as the participants find their footing on the board and their focus in the mind. Koehler describes

the learning curve as surprisingly quick.

“It is amazing to see,” she says. “In a single class the confidence grows. Sure, some have an occasional dip, but that just means they’re going for it!”

The fresh take on yoga generated quite a buzz in the Waterloo community right away, making the first summer of classes easy to fill.

Born and raised in Kitchener, Koehler has been practising yoga for 10 years on and off, and teaching for two. Until last summer, however, her classes were strictly land-based.

“I’m always up for a challenge,” Koehler says.

Her Instagram page — @enlightened.lo — shouts out provocations such as “Nothing easy was ever worth it.... Go for it!!”

And “YOU GOT THIS. Ignite and flourish, baby! You are magic...”

From a distance, Koehler is all YOLO (you only live once) and carpe diem: a vibrant young woman with determination in every step, cheering on everyone around her. Hard to believe someone so full of vim and vigour — a woman who just performed a tree pose on her SUP board 100 metres from shore — battles feelings of being overwhelmed and angst.

Scroll down her Instagram, and you will witness a mix of motivation and vulnerability. Koehler cites her struggles with depression and anxiety as the catalyst to a committed, daring discipline of body-mind balance.

“I was riddled with anxiety,” Koehler says, revealing that the peak of her mental-health crisis hit mid-degree while enrolled in a musical theatre performance program at Brockville’s St. Lawrence College. A particularly astute ballet teacher — in whose class Koehler had shared her struggles of increasing back pain and anxiety — suggested Koehler try yoga.

Discovering the restorative powers of the ancient practice at age 19 soothed not just

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“She is such a risk-taker, with a dogged determination. I’m not surprised it didn’t take long before yoga on the mat didn’t push her far enough.”

ASIA NELSON

For more on Lauren Koehler, visit enlightenedlo.ca
For more on Waterloo Paddling Club, visit waterloopaddlingclub.com

Koehler’s ailing body but also her distraught mind — for the time being.

Upon graduation, the devil of dread struck again and, as is true of any long and winding road, Koehler lost her way. Returning home after college, too stressed to pursue a career in the arts with its inevitable rejection and struggle, Koehler defaulted to retail: familiar from past part-time jobs, but also somewhat abhorred. A “short break” from her goals turned into stints at Time Maternity, then American Eagle and, by 26, manager at Mastermind Toys in Guelph.

Koehler settled in but not comfortably. She was in a funk. When a friend suggested she check out the new hot yoga Moksha studio in Waterloo, a light went off. It had been three years since Koehler’s last yoga class. Of course — yoga.

Again, Koehler experienced what she calls a total rush.

“I loved it immediately. I felt like I was sweating out stress — like getting my body active was really helping my mind.”

Indeed, the scientific study of yoga demonstrates that mental and physical health are not just closely allied, but also essentially equivalent. Harvard Medical School reports the evidence is growing: yoga practice helps increase the body’s ability to respond to stress.

“Anxiety lives in the body, not just the mind,” Koehler says. “And being grounded in the body is a great place to work through it.”

Still, at this point, yoga was just a personal practice. Her work was in retail, even though it was unfulfilling. At the same time, her personal life was suffering with the end of a close relationship.

Koehler’s big leap forward came at 6 a.m. on a cold St. Patrick’s Day in 2015. Aware of the profound effects of yoga on Koehler’s mental health, a friend gifted her a private yoga class with her favourite guest teacher at Moksha, Asia Nelson, founder of Pranalife Yoga.

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Nelson has offered group yoga classes since 2006 and yoga-teacher training for nine years.

“I said I’d be happy to do it,” says Nelson. “And I never say that about anything that happens at 6 a.m., except more sleeping, so I must really love her.”

During that first private session, Nelson witnessed Koehler come alive.

“I could see that she was luminous. She has a bright light,” Nelson says in a phone interview. “But I recognized her light was dim when I first worked with her.”

Nelson, who specializes in back pain due to her own injury, connected with Koehler on several fronts.

“Basically, Asia became my guru,” is how Koehler explains it. “Yoga and Asia were making such a difference in my life – it brought me such big bliss. I wanted to figure out how to get my experience out to people to do this practice too.”

Koehler applied to do teacher training under Nelson, compelled to move her life’s love and saving grace into her vocation. The year she applied, Nelson was contemplating changing her business model. She had been playing with the idea of not doing teacher training at all that year.

“But, honestly, with Lauren signing up, and her enthusiasm so high, I said, ‘Hell yeah, I’m going to run the training.’”

Nelson describes Koehler as one of her most energized, motivated and successful yoga teacher grads to date.

Graduating in 2016, Koehler decided to give herself a “test year,” teaching yoga part time alongside her full-time manager role at Mastermind Toys, to see if she could make yoga into a viable business. “I promised myself that, no matter what, I would keep saying ‘yes’ to yoga.”

Koehler says it was fate last year when she was connected with Ricky Tjandra and Evan Trafford.

Tjandra, 26, and Trafford, 30, are former University of Waterloo dragon-boat racers



Lauren Koehler, right, poses with her ‘guru,’ Asia Nelson, founder of Pranalife Yoga.

PHOTO BY ADA BARLATT

who founded the not-for-profit Waterloo Paddling Club in 2013 at Laurel Creek Conservation Area.

When they got wind of the new SUP yoga trend moving in from the West Coast they started a search for just the right teacher.

“We needed an ambassador to bring SUP yoga to our club,” Tjandra says. “Someone with a big personality, a self-starter with a really infectious passion to drive this idea.”

Koehler was the first person they interviewed.

“She was perfect.”

Koehler, who just kept saying yes to yoga, was onboard immediately. Tjandra and Trafford gave her the month of June 2017 to play around on the board to see what kind of program she could develop.

Laurel Creek’s 47 hectares of mature woods, wetlands and meadows owned by the Grand River Conservation Authority, just minutes from University of Waterloo and surrounded by residential development, is a bit of a nature haven in an increasingly urban setting.

“It was gorgeous,” Koehler says. “I just kept going out to the lake, testing out how the water responded to me, what my body could do, how much I could dare myself

to do. Really looking for that sweet spot (balance) on the board.”

Koehler immediately felt challenged by the added demands of balance and strength: the instability of the board requires fantastic core stabilization in the yoga postures.

“The body has to engage all the little muscles that are often overlooked in strength training and cardio exercise.”

Being so close to nature with the calming effects of water made the practice near perfect for Koehler. The next thing to figure out was how to market the program and make it profitable.

Once again, Koehler found her guidance in Nelson, who happened to be promoting a new advanced yoga business-training program called Pranalife Yoga Pro, co-designed with business coach Carla Beharry and PhD systems engineer Ada Barlatt. Nelson describes it as a personalized “accelerator centre” for building a strong, smart pro yoga business.

“Lauren and her SUP yoga model were perfect,” Nelson says. “She is such a risk-taker, with a dogged determination. I’m not surprised it didn’t take long before yoga on the mat didn’t push her far enough.”

An observer might describe Koehler as fearless, but Nelson is quick to correct that notion.

“Oh no, I wouldn’t call her fearless. She is full of fear and she doesn’t try to hide it. The really redeeming quality about Lauren is that she is brave in the face of fear.”

That courage helped Koehler last September as she walked away from her job in retail. “I didn’t even have to give it a year to see how I could make yoga work full time,” Koehler says.

Teaching at several local yoga studios, plus a full season of SUP Yoga at Laurel Creek this summer, including a new ‘meditation on the board’ course, Koehler is ready to use her own raw energy, open heart and balanced body-mind to dare and inspire others.