

Standing



By KATHERINE NOLL

Like most yoga postures, tree pose looks deceptively simple. Standing tall, you root into the ground with both feet before drawing one foot up and pressing it into the inside of the opposite thigh. • With hips squared forward and gaze directed softly ahead, balance is maintained while focusing on the steady, rhythmic inhale and exhale through the nose, called the ujjiyahi (ooh-JAH-yee) breath. • You calm your mind by staying focused on the present moment and your ujjiyahi. If you can do that, while you might feel yourself swaying like a strong tree in the wind, you won't fall. ►



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NCC's Associate Professor of Psychology Gina Turner (left) uses yoga to help her maintain an inner balance and deal with life's challenges.

Graceful Gina Turner looks as if she was born in tree pose, serene and smiling. While it may be no surprise that the NCC associate professor of psychology is also a certified yoga instructor, what is astounding is how she remains unbowed and deeply grounded after life hurled hurricane-force winds at her: her mother's tragic early death due to breast cancer and the devastating toll of a mental health condition that led to her father's suicide.

She is a testament to the ability to remain resilient in the face of life's challenges with composure and grace. Yet this professor also has a sense of adventure that has led her on a journey from Seattle to Hawaii to New York City before bringing her to NCC.

"I grew up in Seattle before the tech boom in the 1970s," Turner shares of her childhood. "It didn't feel like a big city. It had a small-city vibe, artsy, big music scene and not super diverse."

It was also pre-Nirvana, the band that put Grunge music and the Seattle music scene on the map. For the record, Turner "was wearing flannel before it was cool."

During her school years, Turner's family moved from a neighborhood that was predominantly Asian and African American to a completely white one.

"There was some bullying. You find your way, you find your tribe," she said. To cope, Turner pivoted toward music and theater, finding friends and developing a passion for

the arts that is with her to this day, most recently as a member of the cast of NCC's production of "Hair" in fall 2017.

"I'm the example of that performer who is the wallflower introvert offstage," says Turner, who describes her teenage self as "super shy and a huge reader."

After high school, she enrolled at the University of Washington with the intent of becoming a math teacher. It was the college where Turner's parents, Vickie and Kwame, had gotten their degrees.

"I was naturally good at math, but when it got hard, packed in crowded lecture halls with 700 other students, I grew disenchanted," she says.

Plan B? A drama degree. "My theater friends in high school got me into improv, and we took workshops at Theatresports [an improv comedy troop.] I roomed with some people from the troop, so I thought, why not?"

While Turner's parents were concerned about a major that doesn't always have a clear-cut financial future, they were supportive.

"I had a part-time job at the Seattle Public Library; I was having fun and getting a degree, so they were happy for me," she says. "However, when I graduated and got a full-time clerk job at the library, my mom was like 'Phew!'"

Seemingly, Turner's life was all mapped out. Until the winds came in the form of a

shattering breakup with her college boyfriend.

"My mom knew I was having a really tough time but kept telling me how glad she was I had a stable job, kept the apartment we lived in together, and was doing so well otherwise. And then I packed up and moved to Hawaii," Turner laughs.

LIFE IN GENTLE HAWAIIAN BREEZES

It was initially a co-worker's suggestion that first led Turner to Hawaii, but just as a vacation. But while there, she fell in love with Maui. "I came home and told everybody I was moving there."

No job. No apartment. Yet Turner's parents had faith that she had a decent head on her shoulders. And she did. Within two days, she had an apartment. In four, a full-time job.

Her adventurous spirit is something Turner credits to her parents. "I was raised by two very curious people. We traveled a lot as a family, and they always were trying and doing different things."

Turner lived in Hawaii for two years, working at a resort while becoming heavily involved in community theater, singing and dancing in productions of "Guys and Dolls," "West Side Story" and "A Chorus Line."

The idyllic Hawaiian breezes wouldn't last. The winds came bearing down once again, this time with the news that Turner's

mother had been diagnosed with breast cancer at the age of 47. Turner herself was only 25 years old, yet she knew in order to keep herself and her family grounded, she needed to return home.

ADJUSTING YOUR SAILS TO THE WIND

The next four years would be life-altering ones in many ways. Turner landed a job in the human resources department of Nordstrom, while volunteering for a crisis intervention hotline. But the focal point of her life was her mother's battle with cancer. After she was given a terminal diagnosis, her mother received hospice care at home until she passed away at the age of 51.

"It was a terrible time, but through it all it made an impression on me of what powerful work the hospice people were doing," she says.

Turner decided to train to become a hospice volunteer. Her interest and her crisis intervention work got her thinking she could do this as a profession. "But what

I was really interested in was how people cope with the things that happen to them."

She went back to the University of Washington, eventually getting a bachelor's degree in psychology.

FINDING HER TRUE COURSE

For her next adventure, the winds carried Turner east. She was seeking a doctorate program and decided on The New School for Social Research in New York City. She moved four blocks away from the World Trade Center's South Tower on Aug. 21, 2001, and started a job at Nordstrom on Sept. 11, 2001.

"I left my apartment at 8:30 a.m., and when I came out of the subway, there was all this smoke, confusion and panic," she remembers. "No matter what, New York is a shock to your system for newcomers. But after 9/11, it felt like everyone was learning how to live in the city again."

Yet Turner remained in the city for eight more years while she finished her graduate degree and postdoctoral position at

The Mount Sinai Hospital. In that time, she found another of her life's passions: the intersection of language, health and psychology.

"I decided that the research side of psychology wasn't for me, nor was being a counselor. The New School is where I learned that I loved teaching. They put me exactly on the path that I wanted."

She moved to Jersey City and applied for a teaching job at a Seattle community college, with the intent of moving back to the West Coast.

"I thought for sure I was going to get that job," she remembered. "When I didn't, I thought, since I'm going to be here awhile, I might as well start dating."

It was a fair wind that was blowing when Turner met her future husband Drayson Hounsome, currently the head coach of Rider University's women's soccer team, who hails from the island of Jersey in the British Isles. The love affair slowed Turner's search for jobs across the country, and once she and Hounsome settled in the Princeton



Upper right, Turner and her parents, Vickie and Kwame, circa 1968. Left, Turner as a cast member of the NCC theater production of "Hair" with Jeff Armstrong, left, and Kevin Gaughenbaugh.



area of New Jersey, she began to look for jobs closer to her new home. That's when she discovered Northampton.

NO REASON TO FEAR THE WIND

Today she's teaching health psychology and cognitive psychology classes and a research methods class for the honors program.

A yoga enthusiast since the 1990s, Turner decided to get certified to teach yoga, partly "because I wanted to teach my students the mind-body connection. Your ability to be able to reach out to people when you are ill, or stressed, can affect your ability to cope.

"I feel lucky that as a professor, it's my job to talk about stress management, and the tools I teach them are something solid and concrete that they can use for the rest of their lives. I even do yoga in class with my students."

Part of her curriculum includes a health intervention project, in which students choose a health behavior they want to change, like diet, exercise, sleep or stress management, and journal about it while trying new methods to effect change in their behaviors.

Excerpts from her students' journals paint a picture of just how thought changing, and even life changing, the project is for students:

"I have learned how hard 'just doing something' can be, and have a deeper

respect for people who are trying to make a change in their lives."

"Within the first four days I began getting outside and exercising. In that short time I noticed that I only had to use my inhaler occasionally and after four more days I had been breathing better than I had in months, if not years. I am beyond happy about it. I would like to thank you for providing the motivation I needed to get over my fears."

"I think maybe you assigned us these journal entries as a way to help us reflect on ourselves differently. Self-observation is a key to self-growth. This has helped me a lot."

Turner's also been helping community members as well as faculty and staff with stress management as a yoga instructor for the college's adult personal enrichment program.

Reneé Vannicola, administrative assistant in the President's Office, credits Turner's yoga class with helping her destress after a busy day.

"Gina has a very calming voice. You can't help but feel relaxed," Vannicola says. "Once you take a class with her, you are hooked. You will want to continue. She is an awesome yoga instructor."

Tamara Tucker Mehlig, assistant to the president, agrees. "Gina's personality is so energizing and motivating, you can't help leave class without a smile and feeling

relaxed."

Turner's sense of well-being, and deeply rooted self-care, that she is able to share with all the different students she works with was once again put to the test with another family tragedy in the summer of 2017.

"My father had bipolar disorder and managed it really well throughout most of his life, although he for sure had his ups and downs," she confides. "He took his own life. That's why it's more important for me than ever to be kind to other people and to instill in my students the same.

"When you start talking to others, you realize everyone has times of misery and stress. I'm now doing a citizenship unit as part of the NCC's student leadership program. Not only does the unit connect students with community organizations they can help, but it also makes them examine their own values, how they can be kind to people, and how to be as empathetic as possible to others while managing their own emotions."

Swayed but not felled, Turner has put down roots at Northampton and scattered seeds of kindness that will sprout in the community, no matter where the next winds of adventure may take her. ■

Get help for yourself or a loved one by calling the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-8255 or visiting suicidepreventionlifeline.org.