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Health

The art of healing: Crow Collection offers wellness classes to ease stress

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Because her job as a legal assistant means she's seated in front of a computer most of her workday, Makena

Brogdon's back hurts.

Relief has come from an unlikely place — the art museum at the bottom of the Trammell Crow Center, the office building in downtown Dallas where she works. Brogdon slips away at noon most Fridays to take a restorative yoga class at the Crow Collection of Asian Art.

Leaders at the Crow Collection hope to offer similar relief to even more of the 10,000 people, like Brogdon, who are working in nearby office towers. They launched the Wellness Institute in January to ramp up their efforts to make wellness classes and education free and accessible to the people living and working in the Arts District area.

Besides yoga, the Wellness Institute hosts Mini Meditations on weekday mornings, weekly classes in Qigong and tai chi, Family Yoga at Klyde Warren Park on Saturday mornings, an evening lecture series, and weekly lunchtime Wellness 101 seminars focused on this year's theme, "Year of Practice."

"We see the museum as a place to connect Eastern practices of wellness with a very stressed-out Western

audience,” says Amy Lewis Hofland, executive director of the Crow Collection. “We want to become this pearl of well-being in the Arts District.”

An artful way to de-stress

The Crow Collection is one of a growing number of art museums that offers wellness programs, such as the mindful awareness series of guided meditations offered at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles. With art from China, Japan, India, Korea and Southeast Asia, the Crow seems like a natural setting for wellness practices with Asian roots.

Participants can meditate alongside the sixth-century *Head of a Buddha* from China, with its focused, meditative gaze, or practice tai chi next to the 2012 painted bronze, *Sweepers*, depicting Tibetan monks in a ritualized meditation centered on sweeping a floor.

While most museums that offer yoga or other classes do so in space outside their galleries, the Crow puts participants right in the middle of rooms filled with priceless art, according to Jacqueline Buckingham Anderson, the institute’s director.

“I’ve been in a lot of yoga classes,” says Anderson, who

trained extensively as a yoga teacher. “But to be surrounded by incredible works of art, it feels like a sacred space.”

In turn, classes also give participants a way to appreciate the art even more deeply.

“There are so many representations of the mind-body connection in the art in the museum,” Anderson says. Having classes in the Crow “makes the art relevant over and over again.”

Bringing wellness programs to the Crow Collection caps a professional and personal journey for Hofland, who was diagnosed in 2011 with thyroid cancer.

“That was a personal pause moment for me,” Hofland says. “It led me to realize the impact of stress and other unhealthy aspects of how we live.”

Journey to wellness

Hofland spearheaded changes in her own health habits as well as those of the museum staff. Until a few years ago, the staff kept sodas in the break-room fridge and ordered pizza for lunch. Now, the break room is stocked with healthy snacks, and staff members take monthly

hikes together and enjoy discounts on memberships at the nearby Y. Hofland, who is now in full remission, also walks every morning at White Rock Lake and takes advantage of the yoga and tai chi classes at the museum. Having gotten healthy inside, Hofland says, the museum was ready to create a place where the public also can retreat and renew.

Aside from churches, she says, a museum may be one of the few quiet and free spaces available for quiet reflection or retreat.

“We know that spending slow time with art has wonderful benefits to the body: decreased blood pressure, reduced cortisol, lower heart rate,” she says. “These moments with works of art, practiced with intention and pattern, can reduce, even reverse the damaging effects of prolonged stress. Museums offer this kinder, gentler medicine.”

While the museum has offered yoga and tai chi classes for years, leaders say the Wellness Institute is expanding the quantity and scope of classes, adding meditation and other practices in mindfulness, as well as bringing a cohesive direction that connects art, practice and learning. Each month, the institute

develops programming around one focus area — rest in June, happiness in July — with classes and lectures keyed to that month’s theme.

Leaders also see the Wellness Institute as a platform for future development. The institute is seeking grants and sponsorship gifts to fund outreach programs to schools, businesses and online wellness learning components, such as guided meditations, lectures or introductions to tai chi or other practices. (The institute’s launch was part of the Crow’s budget for 2015.)

The institute also has added lectures that help participants understand the history and context of wellness practices and connect them to evidence-based medicine. For example, a clinical nutritionist lectured on Ayurvedic nutrition and a Tibetan medicine expert spoke on “Tibetan Well-Being: Mind-Body Practices From the Cave to the Clinic.”

“What they’re doing is trying to think comprehensively,” says Bonnie Pitman, former director of the Dallas Museum of Art, a Wellness Institute advisory board member, and a UT Dallas distinguished scholar in residence. While the institute is still in its early stages, she says, leaders are “looking to create

integrated programs that bring together resources and different points of view on wellness.”

‘Stolen from the ancients’

As an example, Pitman cites a Wellness Institute lecture in March by Dennis Kratz, dean of the School of Arts and Humanities at UT Dallas, who spoke on “Philosophy as Physician.”

Kratz joked that the idea for the Wellness Institute was “stolen from the ancients,” because ancient thinkers connected philosophy with physical healing, seeing health as a matter of mind, body and spirit as a whole.

“I just love this whole idea,” he says. “It makes you think more expansively about what wellness really means. It’s not just the absence of sickness.”

Health and wellness programs are proving an effective avenue for museums to stay relevant and connect with people in their communities, according to a 2013 report by the American Alliance of Museums, “Museums on Call: How Museums Are Addressing Health Issues.” The report spotlighted hundreds of U.S. museums that offer some type of health- or wellness-related program, including broad wellness programs such as the Crow’s

to those aimed at specific health issues. The Memphis Brooks Museum of Art in Memphis, Tenn., offers Alzheimer's Art Therapy Tours for those with memory loss and their caregivers; the Florida State University Museum of Fine Arts partnered with the FSU College of Medicine's Autism Institute to highlight the efforts of artists with autism spectrum disorders.

At the same time, medicine is looking at art as a source of healing, according to Katherine Wagner, CEO of the Business Council for the Arts in Dallas, a nonprofit arts advocacy organization.

Healing rituals

“Not only are art museums talking about health, hospitals are embracing art,” she says, citing examples such as the art collection of the William P. Clements Jr. University Hospital in Dallas, which opened in December, selected to soothe patients' spirits.

“Increasingly, studies show the positive effect art has not only on the patient experience but also on the healing process,” the hospital's website says.

Wagner says that interest was sparked by a landmark study in the early '80s, in which researchers compared

the outcomes of patients in a Pennsylvania hospital wing who'd all undergone the same gallbladder surgery. Half had rooms with views of a beautiful natural setting; the other half looked out at a brick wall.

While their rooms were the same, and they were all treated by the same nursing team, the patients in rooms with a view had shorter post-op hospital stays and took fewer painkillers than the patients who faced a brick wall.

Aesthetics can help people heal — and that's nothing new, says a 2009 report on arts in health care, conducted by the Society for the Arts in Healthcare.

“Throughout recorded history, we see evidence that pictures, stories, dances, music and drama have been central to healing rituals,” the report says. “Today's renewed focus on humanistic care is leading to resurgence in the knowledge and practice of incorporating the arts into health care services.”

Anderson believes the Crow's proximity to downtown office towers presents another significant opportunity: to lead nearby businesses to adopt meditation, yoga and other mindfulness practices as a way of reducing

employee stress, improving productivity and reducing health care costs.

Good for business

A few large companies in other cities have done so, with good results. Aetna added yoga classes for employees and measured decreased stress levels and better productivity among those employees who chose to participate. General Mills now has meditation rooms in all of the buildings of its corporate campus, and Goldman Sachs teaches meditation on the job.

“We hope to provide a place that can connect wellness with success in the workplace,” Anderson says. “In addition to being happier and healthier, people can become more productive through mindfulness and meditation.”

As for Brogdon, the legal assistant, she’s just glad she has a convenient place to retreat during the day to refresh and restore.

“Just having the art around you, the beauty, it’s better than exercising in a gym,” she says. “And when I leave, it feels good, mind, body, and spirit.”

GET FIT IN THE ARTS DISTRICT

Klyde Warren Park: The park offers a range of classes, from fast-paced boot camps and Zumba classes to more tranquil yoga and tai chi sessions. klydewarrenpark.org

The Crow Collection of Asian Art: The Wellness Institute's weekly calendar includes Mini Meditations (weekdays 8:30 a.m. to 8:50 a.m.); Qigong (Tuesdays at 5:15 p.m.); yoga in the galleries (Thursdays at 6:15 p.m.); restorative yoga (Fridays at noon); tai chi in the galleries (Saturdays at 9 a.m.); and family yoga at Klyde Warren Park (Saturdays at 10 a.m. through October.) The museum also plans two weeks of summer camps for first-fifth grade students focused on yoga and other wellness activities. crowcollection.org/learn/wellness

Sammons Park: The Local Motion fitness series includes yoga, Pilates and Zumba, open to all ages and levels, taught by local fitness experts. Free parking at the Winspear Opera House in Lexus Red Parking. attpac.org/series/local-motion

SOURCE: The Dallas Arts District Visitors Guide