

Local fitness instructor takes a Christian approach to yoga
By: Tiffany Williams, Courier staff
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**Staff photo by Jerry
Baker**

THE WOODLANDS - Although yoga has been touted as a treatment for nearly every ailment - from insomnia to breast cancer - one Woodlands resident claims an aspect of her life the holistic exercise doesn't improve is her relationship with God.

But Laura Monica aims to change that with a Christian program similar to yoga and Pilates: WholyFit. The serene spiritual-inspired stretches, developed three years ago by Monica, are gaining popularity in The Woodlands. "As Christians, we are sort of blackballed from the mind/body industry because we don't want to follow the yoga philosophies and practices, which conflict with Christianity," Monica, 47, said. Students of yoga learn to accept all religions and philosophies, according to www.experiencefestival.com, a Web site that promotes peace through meditation and awareness of all world religions. Monica said Christians "simply cannot participate" in classical yoga principles. "Classical yoga teaches you can call God by any name," she said. "But Christians believe that God's name is very important and defines who he is. We can't accept Sheba is God or Rama is God. We consider that to be idolatry." Instead, WholyFit promotes a worldview based on Biblical principles, according to Monica's Web site, www.wholyfit.org. During each hour-long session, which takes place at local churches and Monica's home, participants memorize Bible scripture and pray while working through five exercise cycles that begin with a warmup. Monica said her system varies from traditional yoga, which does not utilize warmup stretches.

"Because of the warmup, all participants get maximum flexibility results," she said. "That is the part of the exercise where we memorize scripture. It is a devotional exercise." She said she also teaches a secular version at health clubs like 24 Hour Fitness under the heading of Pilates and Yoga. "We feel like it benefits people with or without the scriptures," Monica said. Her boss, Janet Parsons, agrees. "Laura is the best yoga instructor," Parsons, area group manager at 24 Hour Fitness, gushed. "Since she moved here she has been our top yoga instructor. She has the largest yoga classes at 24 Hour Fitness." She said Monica teaches about 30 people at a time, four sessions a week. Monica also trains potential yoga instructors, helping them attain their certificates. "She is our top recruiter and staffer in that respect," Parsons said.

Monica said she has been teaching fitness classes for more than 25 years but didn't explore yoga until she was diagnosed with Epstein Barre virus, which destroyed her immune system, in her mid-30s. Her family was living in Los Angeles at the time. "I had chronic fatigue, became allergic to all foods and my immune system began attacking my joint tissue," she said. "I came to learn it happened because of a buildup of toxicity. The exercise was part of my answer to prayer for healing." As part of her recovery,

Monica's family moved to rural Georgia, where they attended Johnson Ferry Baptist Church. She said, "90 people were breaking down the door wanting a Christian alternative to yoga." "I had been inventing Christian fitness programs for years," the long-time interdenominational Christian said. "In 2003 when we moved here and began attending Wood Edge Church, everyone loved the idea and had me start a similar program here."

Now Monica and other WholyFit instructors are teaching WholyFit at Faith Community Church, StoneBridge Church, First Baptist Church of The Woodlands, Boni's Dance and Performing Arts Studio in The Woodlands and Legacy Christian. The growing company employs 20 instructors and seven master trainers, who train other instructors and prepare them for their fitness certification. "Right now we're all working nonprofit, but we're seeking strategic alliances and investors," Monica said. "It looks like we'll incorporate or become a franchise so we can self-sustain."

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