Yoga provides Port couple with healthy escape from hectic pace of high-energy family life

With two sets of twins — 11-year-olds Charles and Elliot and 7-year-olds Josephine and Stuart — and two dogs Lillie and Zoey creating a swirling dervish, just getting out the door in the morning is a challenge for parents Joann and Tom DeMerit of Port Washington

In the midst of it all, the couple has found the secret to serenity — take a deep breath and “Ommmmmmm.”

"One morning when we were running all over, one of the kids said, ‘Let’s just stop and ‘ommm’ for a while,’” said Joann, a yoga instructor for the Port Washington Park and Recreation Department.

Yoga has helped her deal with stress since she was in her 20s and working at Microsoft in Seattle, Joann said. Now, it is a family activity.

Tom, who ran during his lunch hour until he took a yoga class with his wife, now uses the noon break for yoga three to four times a week.

Their children often mimic their parents or do their own poses for a few minutes before hurling on to some new adventure. Josie is more attuned to yoga than her brothers and sometimes goes to her mother's classes. She can do most of the poses.

Joann initially took yoga classes for the serenity it provided.

"I've always been a Type A person and had stress. I worked at Microsoft with tons of Type A people," she said.

"Before I got pregnant, I was running nine miles and was very active and fit."

Joann was sick with both pregnancies, which limited her ability to exercise. During the second pregnancy, she couldn't move without becoming nauseated, so she basically laid on the couch for nine months.

"After that, I really got into yoga," Joann said. "I could do it in the living room with my little guys in bouncy seats. It was slow movement, and I started to build my muscles back up slowly. It helped me mentally to slow down, but it also had amazing physical benefits in how it built muscle tone.

"Doing yoga and lifting up kids — yoga is all about using your (and your children's) body weight."

When Stuart decided it was fun to push Mommy over when she was in a balancing pose, Joann took lessons at the Sheboygan YMCA. It offered free child care.

"It was my time," Joann said. "When I would take a class, it was like, 'This is heaven.'"

When the yoga teacher left, Joann became a certified instructor so she could continue doing yoga and get free child care.

Tom considered yoga to be his wife's escape until she convinced him to take a class at the American Club in Kohler the morning after a company Christmas party.

He found he felt better after doing yoga and didn't have the aches and pains that came from running or playing basketball.

"I was a four-sport athlete in high school and college. You reach an age where some of the physical activities take a pounding on your body and legs," Tom said. "Yoga is a good exercise without the potential stress on your body."

Tom takes power yoga classes, which he said most men would probably prefer.

"With guys who have an athletic background, the power stuff is an easier transition," he said. "You want a feeling of exercising. Most of the yoga classes have all levels in them. After you've done it enough, you know ways you can amplify the poses and moves or take it easier."

Since he's been doing yoga regularly, Tom said, he hasn't had back pains after shoveling snow or sinus congestion in the spring and fall.

Joann said it's because his energy channels, his chakras, have been opened.

When the couple went to Hawaii for their first vacation without kids, they started each day with a yoga class. They took eight classes at six different studios.

"They were all very different. That's what people need to do. If they go to a yoga class and don't like it, they should definitely try another instructor and type of yoga," Joann said.

She became involved in the city's park and recreation program four years ago when a friend suggested she teach a yoga class at the center.

Park and Recreation Director Charlie Imig agreed to try a class with Joann receiving a percentage of the fee.

"It was a win-win situation for both of us," Joann said. "I didn't have to open a studio and they didn't have to pay an instructor. It just really flew. It was amazing how many people came."

Joann taught classes in both Sheboygan and Port Washington until Port's enrollment became high enough to keep her busy.

She completed a 200-hour Yoga Alliance certification course in Cedarburg and is working on a 500-hour certification program in yoga therapy, a field in which she would like to specialize to help people recovering from injuries or disabilities.

"Anybody is capable of doing yoga. I have people tell me they're too stiff to do yoga and I think, 'That's when you really need yoga,'" she said. "It's all about listening to your body and doing what your body can do.

"Yoga puts you more in tune with your body, and you know when something is wrong."

She is particularly enthusiastic about the benefits yoga has for children. She has done wellness programs at Thomas Jefferson Middle School and Lincoln Elementary School in Port Washington.

"It has amazing benefits for kids in clearing the mind for learning," Joann said. "I met with all the physical education teachers, but really they should do it in all the classes.

"When kids come racing into math classes from recess, they bring whatever happened on the playground into the room. They could do some simple breathing exercises to focus their minds. Studies have shown students retain information better after doing simple breathing exercises."

Some people think yoga is a type of religion, she said.

"It's not a religion, but it can help you become deeper in any religion or whatever your belief," she said.

"It brings balance into your life."

Joann and Tom DeMerit were serene amid the chaos created by their two sets of twins (from left) Elliot and Charles, 11, and Stuart and Josephine, 7, and dogs Zoey and Lillie (on the sofa). Photo by Sam Arendt