

Cat yoga in Des Moines? You're kitten me

Tressa Glass, tglass@registermedia.com 8:54 p.m. CDT June 8, 2016



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(Photo: Kelsey Kremer/The Register)

As I rolled out my yoga mat in the Mapes Auditorium at the Animal Rescue League of Iowa's main shelter, I felt a smug sense of accomplishment for landing a ticket to one of the hottest yoga classes in Des Moines.

Cats N Mats started this year and has taken place three times so far. All three classes sold out in less than an hour, in spite of the large class size of 60 spots. It only cost \$10 but felt more exclusive than a Garth Brooks concert at Wells Fargo Arena.

Thanks to volunteer yoga instructor Amy Becker, it has brought in over \$1,800 that goes directly to the 90-year-old animal shelter to help care for homeless animals. It also gives them a chance to show off kittens they have coming up for adoption. Animal Rescue League spokeswoman Stephanie Filer said they had hosted regular yoga classes before recently introducing kittens into the mix.

"I saw a yoga group that brought kittens and cats into a class and it seemed like a no-brainer for us," Filer said. "We already had a yoga class and obviously had access to animals so it seemed natural to combine the two."

Being a fan of geriatric, Netflix-binging cats, I wondered why they only use kittens. Apparently they don't get stressed out at having a lot of adoring people around them like adult cats do. I asked if they considered a class for Des Moines' dog people.

"We ended up not continuing (dog yoga) because it ended up being more of a playtime than yoga," Filer said.

The downward dog jokes were probably intolerable, too.

Sitting on my mat, I watched the room quickly fill in around me. In my conversation with Filer, she mentioned a unique age range for this class. Enough, 6-year-old Finn Graves of Des Moines rolled out his green yoga mat next to mine. (For folks who don't typically take yoga classes; you don't find a lot of quiet, meditating children.) Finn appeared to be a gentle, thoughtful kid and said he had done

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Kelsey Valley, of Altoona plays with a kitten during Cats N Mats Yoga at the Animal Rescue League of Iowa, on Sunday, June 5, 2016. Cats N Mats is a yoga session that incorporates kittens which are up for adoption at the ARL. (Photo: Kelsey Kremer/The Register)

The class was mostly comprised of women with a few men across a variety of ages and skill levels. There were people like Shannon Rogers, 23, of Des Moines, who said she came to the class because it was for a good cause but doesn't do much yoga normally. Then there were people like Kellee Mullen, 31, of Des Moines, who said she practiced yoga regularly.

Everyone sat facing forward on their mats, and the class began.

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Tressa Glass, Des Moines Register reporter, tries out yoga with kittens during Cats N Mats Yoga at the Animal Rescue League of Iowa, on Sunday, June 5, 2016. Cats N Mats is a yoga session that incorporates kittens which are up for adoption at the ARL. (Photo: Kelsey Kremer/The Register)

The room was calm until the moment we had all been waiting for, when staff and volunteers closed the outside doors and started placing kittens around the room. Goodbye, namaste. The room was teeming with playful kittens and tons of giggling from us. Becker began her class by calling attention to the “abundance of love in the room and how unconditional it is.” She was right, the kittens were the purest form of joy and laughter.

Then the dreadful thought crossed my mind: “What if someone steps on a cat?” I thought back to other yoga classes and how challenging it can be to hold your balance in certain poses. However, Becker had this covered as the class almost entirely focused on relaxation and gentle stretching. “We don’t do anything impulsive or quick,” she said, to protect the kittens.

“Amy is good about incorporating cat love into her practice,” attendee Kelsey Valley of Altoona said.

Becker drew attention and mindfulness to the kittens and cracked jokes through the class. There was a moment where a kitten, in typical cat fashion, stretched out and stole her spot on her yoga mat.

Besides the fact that none of the kittens took a special interest in me, I tried not to take it personally that Graves had not one, but three close kitten friends. I understand the obsession with this event — it gives cat lovers who might not have a cat of their own a chance bond with the animals on a personal level. It also gives children and beginning level yogis a chance to participate in a judgment-free class with a fun distraction. If you go, bring your own yoga mat, a camera and maybe even some cat toys.

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A kitten walks among yoga participants during Cats N Mats Yoga at the Animal Rescue League of Iowa, on Sunday, June 5, 2016. Cats N Mats is a yoga session that incorporates kittens which are up for adoption at the ARL. (Photo: Kelsey Kremer/The Register)

"There's definitely more Cats N Mats to come," Filer said.

The Animal Rescue League of Iowa hasn't announced the date of the next Cats N Mats, yet.

Upcoming non-traditional Des Moines yoga classes to try:

Bottoms Up with Power Life Yoga at Exile Brewing Company: Sunday, June 12, 1 p.m.

Parks Yoga by Pop Up Yoga DSM at Ewing Park: Monday, June 13, 6:30 p.m.

Happy Hour Yoga at Des Moines Social Club: Tuesday, June 14, 5:30 p.m.

Yoga + Raygun by Pop Up Yoga DSM at Raygun: Friday, June 17, 6:30 p.m.

Hangover Yoga at Des Moines Social Club: Sunday, June 18, 10:30 a.m.

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A kitten relaxes during Cats N Mats Yoga at the Animal Rescue League of Iowa, on Sunday, June 5, 2016. Cats N Mats is a yoga session that incorporates kittens which are up for adoption at the ARL. (Photo: Kelsey Kremer/The Register)

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