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COVER STORY

NEW CONNECTIONS

Matthew Sanford links yoga's self-awareness and healing

By KRISTA JAHNKE
FREE PRESS STAFF WRITER

Tickle the bottom of Matthew Sanford's foot, and he won't feel it.

He's been paralyzed from the chest down since a car accident more than 30 years ago.

But squeeze his ankles — really squeeze them — and he'll sense it. A subtle energy, a sort of hum, will rush from his bone and spark to life in his brain.

Help Sanford onto a yoga mat, and the 44-year-old who hasn't walked since he was 13 will achieve poses that trouble even the strongest able-bodied practitioners.

Not that that's the point.

His message is not about how he is able, despite being disabled. It's about how we all can live more fully in our bodies with a stronger mind-body connection. And don't you dare say he overcame anything, he says.

"We're always taught to 'overcome' disability," Sanford says. "But you can't overcome your body. I didn't become a yoga teacher because I overcame anything. That's exactly wrong. I'm a yoga teacher because I live an altered mind-body relationship."

"Your body is the best home your mind will ever have, and it's the only one you get."

Sanford, a yoga instructor, speaker and author of "Waking: A Memoir of Trauma and Transcendence" (Rodale, \$14.95), will bring his message to metro Detroit this week. He'll speak Thursday at the Rehabilitation Institute of Michigan (RIM) in Detroit. On Friday, Saturday and Sunday he'll speak and teach classes at the Center for Yoga in West Bloomfield.

LIFE FOR SANFORD changed forever on a late-night drive with his family from Kansas City to their home in Minnesota. The car hit an icy overpass and careened down the embankment. The accident killed his father and 20-year-old sister. His mother and brother escaped with no serious injuries. Sanford, who grew up playing sports, was paralyzed from his fourth vertebrae down.

Doctors at the Mayo Clinic were quick to point out that any "feelings" he had in his legs were phantom sensations. They thought it best for him to ignore them because the fact was he'd never walk again. Why get his hopes up?

For the next 12 years, Sanford lived that way, life as a "floating torso," he says, dragging his lower half around.

He focused any physical activity on strengthening his upper body. He finished school, earning a graduate degree in philosophy from the University of California, Santa Barbara. When he was 25, he met a yoga teacher named Jo Zukovich, who took him to a local martial arts studio and helped him get out of his wheelchair to sit on the floor.

And then something simple yet life-changing happened. With Zukovich's help, Sanford spread his legs wide.

"It was really emotional," Sanford says. "It was really



Rubinstein Photo

Matthew Sanford says he wants to spread more information about the mind-body connection to the health-care industry. "Yoga gets you to live your body in more spaces," he says.



www.matthewsanford.com

Sanford, 44, lives outside Minneapolis with his wife, Jennifer, and son Paul. He was paralyzed more than 30 years ago in a car accident.

powerful. I had tears coming down my face, but I didn't know why. But then I realized, I hadn't had my legs wide for 12 years. Why would a paralyzed guy have his legs in a wide 'V'? And I realized the answer — because it's my birthright to live in as much of my body as I can."

That was 19 years ago. Sanford's life has since been transformed through the practice of yoga.

He now teaches at yoga conferences around the country. He has won awards for his pioneering ideas in medicine. In Minnesota, he teaches regular yoga classes as well as adaptive classes for disabled people.

He also speaks at business conventions because his message about mind-body connections applies to everyone, not just people with disabilities. Sanford says we should all pay more attention to living fully in our bodies and recognizing the subtle sensations there.

Why? "Because they will improve the quality of your life," he says. "It will improve your connection to your life. Your relationships change. Your stress will go down. Our culture is in a hurry, and we're moving too fast.

We're stressed out, and we don't take time to integrate subtle aspects of who we are through these practices."

A FEW YEARS AGO, Jonny Kest, the owner of the Center for Yoga, which has three locations in metro Detroit, read Sanford's book and was so inspired that he invited him to be the keynote speaker at the Midwest Yoga Conference. He then brought him to Michigan for a series of workshops; he arranged the upcoming visit, too.

Kest says watching Sanford teach an adaptive yoga class is like watching a roomful of light-bulbs flick on.

"It goes on in the eyes of people when they're suddenly aware of something they weren't aware of before," Kest says. "People start to wake up."

It's that awakening that can be so beneficial to healing, says Amy Samson-Burke, a physical therapist who teaches yoga with Sanford at the Courage Center, a Minnesota-based rehabilitation and resource center for people with disabilities.

"As the patient begins to have a greater sense of mind-body awareness and live in their entire body, they feel the con-

nection in their entire body, and they become more engaged in the healing process. And they heal better," Samson-Burke says.

Science is beginning to catch up to what Sanford says he knows firsthand about the power of the mind-body connection.

Last summer, he underwent an MRI of his brain for a study at Rutgers University. The team of doctors mapped his brain as they squeezed his ankles. The images showed that his sensory cortex lit up in the same way it would in a non-paralyzed person.

For Sanford, this test proved what he had already discovered — his lower body might be considered dead, but there was still, somehow, life there.

"It's a level of sensation that I know exists," Sanford says. "And it's missing in our rehabilitation practices."

Cheryl Angelelli, the Rehabilitation Institute's marketing director, says the philosophy there is to treat mind, body and spirit. But she's excited to see how Sanford broadens that message.

"I think it's important for patients to see that you don't have to quit living when you're faced with disability," says Angelelli, a quadriplegic who is a world-record Paralympics swimmer. "There are many possibilities for you in life."

Through his nonprofit Mind Body Solutions, Sanford hopes to spread more information

about the mind-body connection to the health-care industry. He thinks if workers are trained to understand the subtle, powerful nature of that relationship, they can pass the information on to those they try to rehabilitate.

"We need people to come through the health care system and leave that experience more connected to their body, not less," Sanford says. "The simple idea is they'll take better care of themselves and help others to live more vibrantly in their bodies."

Yoga isn't the only way to

understand that, he says. But it's the medium that works for him.

"Yoga gets you to live your body in more spaces," Sanford says. "Yoga makes you feel more alive."

IN AN ADAPTIVE YOGA CLASS, some students stay in their chairs. Others take to the floor; it often depends how much help there is. Regular yoga poses are modified to produce the same benefits for those who can't stand.

In his traditional classes, Sanford teaches from his chair or the floor, leading people through standing poses that he obviously can't do. But he understands them as well as any teacher, Kest says.

"We always teach that yoga is about more than just the posture," Kest says. "And to have a yoga teacher that can't demonstrate every pose is very good for students. It's not about how you look in the poses. It's more important how you feel and how present you are in each and every moment. Even if you could look exactly like the person next to you, you would feel it differently."

When Sanford pulls himself into a 'V' position with his legs raised, he says he can do so because he's come to understand his body's subtle sensations well enough to develop balance and flexibility if not abdominal strength.

And if he can experience that, anyone can.

"A lot of people have preconceptions of what yoga is," says Sanford, who lives outside Minneapolis with his wife and 9-year-old son. "They think you have to be flexible. Beginners often imagine they can't do yoga, and that's part of what I say to them. If I can do yoga, you know you can, too."

ON THE COVER: Matthew Sanford teaches regular as well as adaptive yoga classes. He says his message about mind-body connections applies to everyone.



www.matthewsanford.com

Matthew Sanford will be in metro Detroit this week.

Matthew Sanford

Noon-1 p.m. Thu.
DMC's Rehabilitation Institute of Michigan
Brasza Outpatient Center, 261 Mack, Detroit
Free and open to the public
www.rimrehab.org
313-745-1203

CENTER FOR YOGA

6710 Orchard Lake Road, West Bloomfield
■ 7-9 p.m. Fri., discussion
■ Noon-2 p.m. Sat., workshop for teacher training in adaptive yoga
■ Noon-2 p.m. Sun., workshop for anyone, "Beyond the Physical Asana"
Registration required: 248-865-9642 (865-YOGA)
\$59 each or \$159 for all three

■ For a regular yoga class schedule, go to www.centerforyoga.com. Owner Jonny Kest said people with disabilities are welcome in any class. The center's teachers are trained to adapt routines to fit any ability level.

— KRISTA JAHNKE

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