

Stories of Generosity from the Common Ground Community

Interview by Kate Graham

About 15 years ago, Karen Sorensen began attending a weekly free yoga class offered at a church. After attending the class regularly for about five years, her teacher fell ill and asked if Karen would lead the class when she no longer could.

Since then, Karen has regularly taught yoga classes. A home economist and writer by trade, Karen's work as a volunteer yoga instructor has led her on numerous adventures teaching both at home and abroad.

ARK – Architects Relationships Knowledge

In 2009, Karen was invited to teach yoga to an international mix of young people who were gathering in Guatemala to learn about pathways to peace.

The trip was organized by ARK for Peace, and youth from the U.S., Malawi, Palestine, Lithuania, and several other countries were invited to attend.

At first, Karen was unsure of her ability to teach yoga to such a diverse group of young people. But, she overcame her doubts when she realized that many of the participants probably had similar fears about going.



During the trip, Karen was impressed by the young people, remarking that, "it's amazing how talented they are, and how you can watch them grow, mature, develop, and work together." It was also a "real eye-opening experience."

Karen was exposed to stories of profound suffering caused by war and poverty in other countries. And, she discovered that people from other countries perceive Americans as indifferent to the suffering of others.

For instance, a woman from Lithuania expressed her belief that Americans are indifferent to global tragedies. "I think breaking down those barriers of what people think of people from the United States is really important to me."

Following her experience in Guatemala, Karen volunteered to write grant applications to help fund ARK's programs.

Karen has felt motivated to continue her work with ARK through the energy of the people she works with, as well as a desire to nurture personal connections with people from other countries.

"I think you're missing a big piece if you don't do service work."

Karen acknowledged that the pace and expectations of work with a non-profit organization are fundamentally different from what she is used to in her professional life, but she manages her frustrations when they arise by recognizing that she is not in control, and looking for ways to make improvements when possible.

Volunteering as Spiritual Practice

Karen's volunteering informs her unique spiritual practice, which includes attending church at First Congregational in Minneapolis, practicing yoga, and attending Qigong classes at Common Ground.



"When I volunteer, and when I'm at Qigong I feel like I share more with the people who are there." For Karen, it's the personal connection that is important.

For instance, being asked to "round up" at the grocery store to donate to a cause reminds Karen of the experience of being asked "do you want fries with that?" at a fast-food restaurant. For Karen, this type of giving lacks authenticity and meaning. And, it does not feel wholesome to engage in volunteer activities out of a sense of obligation.

Karen prefers the special, indescribable feeling of connection she gets from her interactions with people she meets through her many travels, and the feeling of camaraderie as they work together to find a path to peace.