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S.F. yoga master's birthday stretch Exercise party spread out a week

Michael Pena, Chronicle Staff Writer
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(01-06) 04:00 PDT San Francisco -- Leave

it to the devotees of yoga master Manouso Manos to stretch his 50th birthday party -- and their inner loins -- over seven days.

"Do you feel it?" asked the all-too-limber birthday boy, leading a roomful of yoga instructors and students through position after joint-popping position at City College of San Francisco yesterday morning. "Give the lumbosacral area more space!"

Despite yoga's popularity among celebrities and in fitness clubs, the three-hour stretch session was a reminder there is nothing glamorous about the Eastern exercise system for the body and mind -- especially when you get 150 people bending over and grabbing their ankles, practically kissing their kneecaps.

But Manos' friends and followers rolled out the exercise mats and nearly bent over backward for one of the country's most highly respected teachers of Iyengar yoga, named after Yoga master B.K.S. Iyengar, of Pune, India.

They arrived on Friday -- from Southern California, Hawaii, New York and, in one yogi's case, Portugal -- to listen and learn from Manos, whose birthday celebration goes until Thursday.

Manos, who started practicing 30 years ago, has a studio on Monterey Boulevard called the Abode of Iyengar Yoga. Throughout the week, sessions are being held there and in a nearby dance studio at City College.

"With the population aging, people are looking for stress reduction," said Leslie Howard, co-director of Amrita Yoga on Third Street. "The reason behind doing yoga is for consciousness -- not great abs."

But oddly enough, Manos said he came to the Bay Area with a less lofty goal:

to introduce Californians to the Philly cheese-steak sandwich.

The Ohio native moved to Campbell in 1974 to help open a restaurant that specialized in the artery-clogging dish, which Manos said at the time was nowhere to be found.

Two years later, he attended a yoga workshop in Berkeley led by Iyengar himself that awakened a desire to make a difference in people's lives and help them achieve inner peace.

Manos had another gut feeling compelling him to make a life change: He was a vegetarian selling cheese-steaks. So in January 1977, he traveled to Pune and studied with Iyengar.

"This is the closest we get to going to India," said Robin Hall, who teaches at Manos' studio.

Many health-conscious Americans have embraced Iyengar yoga in recent years. It emphasizes detail and technique, not breaking a sweat and burning calories.

In the dim dance studio yesterday, more than 150 yogis stretched, twisted and torqued just about every muscle in their leotard-bound limbs. A few groaned, and most were able to balance for more than two minutes on their head and forearms with toes to the ceiling.

"Come on, relax, let the back neck stretch," Manos said, sounding more like a drill sergeant than stereotypical yoga teacher.

Manos is widely known in yoga circles for his intensity and barking commands. Even in a flimsy white undershirt and pink yoga trunks, Manos is a daunting figure -- standing a wiry 6 feet tall with perfectly squared shoulders.

"This type of yoga gets so deep," said Kathleen Goodman, who has a yoga studio in San Diego. "It's finely detailed, like a fine painting."

E-mail Michael Pena at mpena@sfgate.com.

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