



FROM MIRACLE TO MASTERY

by Charlotte Rogers Brown

Once dubbed "the miracle child" by doctors, Mishell Elliston credits her healthy life today to a mom and a yoga teacher who would not let her quit.

Five-year-old Mishell Vale was jumping rope with a neighborhood friend when she fell and hit her head on the concrete driveway. Mishell's mother cradled her daughter's injured head in her lap as a neighbor rushed them to John C. Lincoln Hospital. She was later transferred to the Barrow Neurological Institute where, after months of physical therapy, doctors declared Mishell would never speak nor walk again.

That was in 1972. Today Mishell Vale Elliston teaches yoga and medicine ball classes at her Central Phoenix studio, Eightlim Yoga - that is, when she isn't training for and competing in triathlons. She has made it her mission to convince any doubters - with and without physical injuries - that the ability to practice yoga is well within their reach. She believes the only limitation in the way of a successful yoga practice is the false belief that it can't be done. And she has the history to back it up.

"If I can do it, anybody can do it," says Mishell, whose fit, athletic body belies the once bleak prognosis for her future. She credits her mother for the first phase of her recovery. "When she took me home from the hospital, that's when my rehab really started," she recalls. Refusing to allow any doctor or test result to dictate her daughter's future, Mishell's mother devised her own physical therapy method. Using her husband's extra belts, she strapped Mishell's arms and legs to her own, and then went about her usual routine of housekeeping chores. "Mom moved me around like a marionette," she remembers.

For several months, Mishell's life centered on relearning much of what she had already mastered before the accident. "I had just learned to tie my sneakers and was so proud of myself, and then all of a sudden, I couldn't do it anymore," she says, recalling all the hours she spent struggling to hold a simple loop in place with her disabled left hand while completing the bow with her right. As soon as she finished, her mother would untie the laces and make her do it all over again. She went through similar ordeals in buttoning her shirts and zipping up her jackets. "It was hell," she says, but by the age of 10 Mishell essentially had rewired her brain around the injury, a result supported by subsequent brain scans. Doctors dubbed her "the miracle child." Nearly all physical functioning had returned, except in her left wrist, hand and foot. There, some loss of fine motor skills remained, though her lingering disability did not keep her from trying new things, including softball and tennis, even gymnastics. Over time, Mishell became adept at hiding her disability, literally keeping her hand out of other people's view. Then at 13, she decided



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she wanted to become a model - partly because modeling seemed glamorous, but even more because it would force her to stop hiding. By this time, her mother's insistence that she could do anything she wanted had rooted inside Mishell, and she was ready to prove it. "Anything where I'd be under a microscope, I did," Mishell says.

For the next ten years, Mishell modeled for runway shows and magazine spreads. She stayed in shape by running and going to the gym. One day while she was peddling away on an exercise bike, she noticed a yoga class starting up on the other side of a glass partition. She began observing the class after workouts. She'd sit outside the window and watch, until the day the instructor invited her to grab a mat and give it try. While running or working out on gym equipment was one thing, managing the kind of moves yoga required was entirely another. If her attempt at gymnastics had left her with anything, it was the firm belief that her left side was just too weak for some pursuits. But the instructor seemed so insistent Mishell relented and took a spot at the front of the room.

"Through the entire class, I mostly just stood there and watched, just as I had outside the window," she recalls. "Afterwards, I felt so defeated, I was practically in tears. I thought, 'Why did I just embarrass myself in front of all these people?'" Now, when Mishell listens to others express how they feel intimidated at the very thought of yoga, believing they aren't flexible enough, strong enough, young enough or coordinated enough to even attempt it, she not only empathizes with them, she knows from first-hand experience that their fear is unfounded. In her case, she decided to place her trust in her instructor and face her fear.



She began by attending class twice a week, then three times, and before long, she was hooked. "I became obsessed with it, because I was getting strong and feeling good,"

she says, adding that the practice not only improved both her sleep and her diet, it provided the impetus to serve her community. "Yoga opened me in unselfish ways." She credits yoga with significantly increasing strength and flexibility in her left arm, hand and foot as well as improving her overall balance, focus, self-confidence and connection with her body.

Next, Mishell took on the challenge of competing in triathlons. "There is no way I would have ever competed in any sport without the breakthrough I had through yoga," she says. She has since become certified as a yoga teacher and opened her studio, Eightlim Yoga. " ... I'll go into anything without hesitation, and it's that spirit I want to instill in my own daughter as she grows up."

Mishell believes anyone can reap the benefits of yoga. Her clients range from athletes to paraplegics, from teens to seniors. To this day Mishell does not have full use of her left hand. She'll likely never be proficient at any activity that requires nimble fingers - like typing or playing the violin - but she can accept that, because she can do so much more than what she once believed possible. "If it weren't for my mom and my yoga trainer - if it weren't for yoga - I wouldn't be doing half of it." •

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