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CELEBRATION ISSUE

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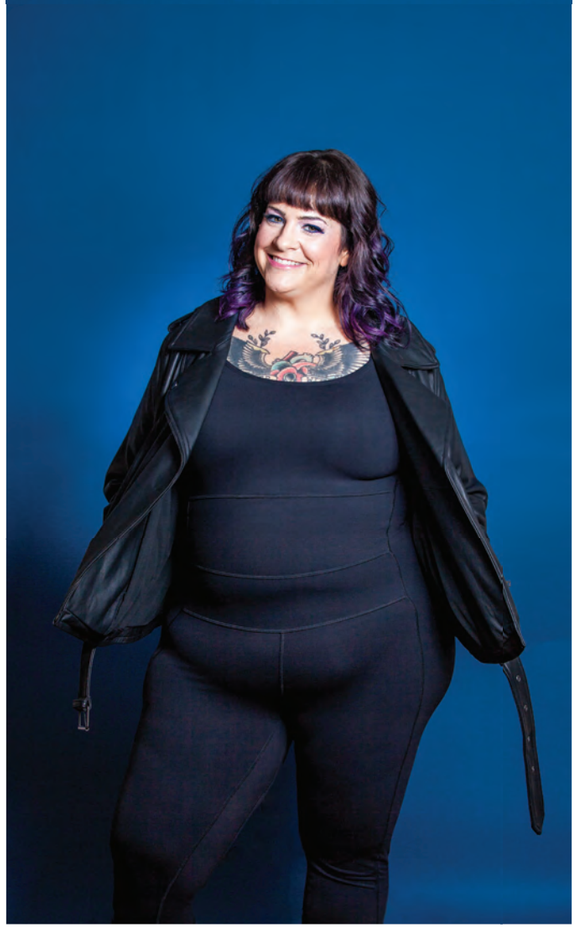
AMBER KARNES on shaking up the status quo and celebrating ALL bodies

Amber Karnes is teaching us to honor our highest selves—and tearing down patriarchal ideology in the process.

BY **LINDSAY TUCKER** | PHOTOGRAPHY BY **TIPH BROWNE**

Pride *and* Joy

WARDROBE: SWEATER: COURTESY OF FOREVER 21, JUMPSUIT: COURTESY OF ATHLETA



AMBER KARNES is well aware that the body positivity movement has been co-opted by commercial campaigns designed to sell us soap and overpriced razors under the guise of developing self-esteem. But when *she* founded Body Positive Yoga in 2010, the concept was more about social justice than capitalism—"to make room and access for all bodies," she says.

At the time, Karnes was halfway through a yearlong 200-hour teacher training, and the same issues kept cropping up in class: She and the other students were learning how to teach poses in a way that's really only effective for one body type: thin and able. "I was always the person giving feedback, like, 'Well, actually, my foot doesn't step forward between my hands,'" Karnes tells me one August afternoon as we sat on a sun-kissed park bench overlooking the Inner Harbor in Baltimore's Federal Hill Park, near her home. "It was like, *Oh! We're actually not learning how to teach to bodies like mine*."

In the decade since Karnes started documenting her yoga practice and sharing how-to videos for bodies like hers online, she's made a name for herself as a teacher and retreat leader, working with other wellness disruptors, such as social justice activist and author Dianne Bondy (with whom she launched Yoga for All Training—a course for teachers who want to make their classes and studios more inclusive and equitable—in 2015) and Accessible Yoga founder and director Jivana Heyman. Karnes and Heyman started the Accessible Yoga Training School in June 2020 and launched a podcast in July. "I just was not really prepared for how meaningful it would be to so many people to see somebody in a body like theirs in a wellness or fitness context practicing yoga," Karnes says.

Karnes has always enjoyed sharing hacks for ways she's figured out how to modify her practice. People often think their own bodies preclude them from participating in certain poses, she says, when the reality is that any posture, when adapted the right way, can work for anyone. For example, tightening a strap around your chest to keep your flesh away from your throat in inversions allows for more spaciousness and fuller breath. This small revelation can be life-changing for students, Karnes says.

WARDROBE: TANK TOP AND LEGGINGS: COURTESY OF TORRID

"I just was not really prepared for how meaningful it would be to so many people to see somebody in a body like theirs in a wellness or fitness context practicing yoga."

"Usually if someone has a large chest and that's been troublesome to them in their practice, there's this *aha* exclamation moment that totally changes the way they see themselves and their practice."

Finding Body Neutrality

When Karnes and I met, if it hadn't been 2020—the dumpster fire scorched by a global pandemic—she would have just returned home from her Body Positive Yoga Summer Camp, a retreat she began leading in 2015. For five days, groups of 20 gather in Virginia's Blue Ridge Mountains on the Maury River to practice yoga and self-acceptance with Karnes. There's swimming and dancing and rock jumping and 360-degree mountain views and lifelong friendships forged among the trees. "People in larger bodies are hyperaware of how much space they take up," says Andrea DiMaio, a yoga teacher who has studied with Karnes through Accessible Yoga and attended her summer camp last year. "But here, you can take as much space as you want to, and it's fine, and it's welcome, and it's encouraged. You can simply enjoy the swim, the sun, the feeling of the water and the air. You don't have to have this constant reel in your mind: *Do I look too big?* or whatever. You can dance and be fully in your body and experience the moment of joy—of reckless abandon, of moving with the music."

Indeed, Karnes really shines when she's celebrating others—and helping them celebrate themselves. "The way I build community is I create the space that I want to be in, one that doesn't exist [elsewhere]," she tells me in her slight Southern drawl. With Body Positive Yoga Summer Camp, Karnes created an atmosphere where people feel free to be themselves in their bodies, learning to love them—or at least accept them. "If we don't get to love, that's OK. It's a pretty tall order," she admits.

Karnes says she's carved out a path toward loving her own body by embracing a practice of using nonjudgmental words to acknowledge the body's existence and functions rather than its appearance—and by questioning the systems, such as the patriarchy, capitalism, and white supremacy, that profit from fatphobia. By examining who benefitted from her hating her appearance in the first place, and by connecting physically with her body through yoga, she embraces what she calls "being unbothered" by how she looks. Choosing thoughts such as *I have a body* or *These are the thighs of a human being* rather than body-positive messages (*My body is beautiful!*) that often still equate beauty with worth, is the first step. "I'm not trying to sell myself on anything," she says. "This isn't something you're going to embroider on a pillow or make a Pinterest graphic out of."

"I love that she's direct, and she's an unusual personality in yoga," Heyman says of Karnes's natural, unapologetic honesty and insight. "Most yoga teachers try to put on this façade of peacefulness and rising above it all. She doesn't do that. She's so grounded and authentic—yoga is about being here in this body right now, and she [embodies that]."

Breaking Down Oppressive Systems

Perhaps loving our bodies is so difficult because we live in a society with a $60-billion-a-year diet industry that carries a regression rate of more than 80 percent, where beauty standards teach us "that our body is a problem to be solved or a project to constantly be worked on," Karnes says. And this is the very problem with the body positive movement as it exists today, she says: "If all we're doing is taking the same old beauty standard but saying that now plus-size people can play, that everyone can be beautiful, we're still putting that emphasis on appearance. We're still connecting beauty to worth."

> "If all we're doing is taking the same old beauty standard but saying that now plus-size people can play, that everyone can be beautiful, we're still putting that emphasis on appearance. We're still connecting beauty to worth."

Instead, Karnes says, we need to remember that we're inherently deserving just as we are and don't need to be fixed. "Because we're all marinating in this soup of 'your body is connected to how worthy you are,' we forget that there's actually a higher purpose we could serve other than being hyperfixated on our appearance, which by the way, is one of the things that's guaranteed to change."

Karnes proposes we throw out the existing measuring stick and instead focus our energies on real problems, such as inequity and our dying planet. And to do that, we need to abandon the profit-driven way of life we were born into, she says: "Whether we're running a studio or we're a teacher, our decisions can be human centered rather than profit centered."

Of course, Karnes understands that businesses need to make money in order to survive—she's running one herself, after all. But the choices she makes sometimes mean sacrificing dollars or accolades in order to feel in higher alignment with her true Self. "I share my platform a lot," she says. "If I'm offered an opportunity, I ask myself if it's something that I can pass along." In the past, she's said no to teacher training jobs and ads for major national brands so she could share the opportunity with someone less represented than she.

In fact, a prevailing theme in her personal practice and her teaching is the idea of personal agency and power—rejecting the notion that our circumstances (the dream job, big house, successful business, perfect body) define who we are or how we feel about ourselves. Yoga helps dismantle that idea, teaching us that we have everything we need inside of us and helping us work with the mind to cultivate intentional thoughts and self-compassion that then help us show up better for others. "We all have that spirit, that inner radiance, that spark of divinity that defines the experience of being alive and being human," Karnes says. "And if we can start that journey of turning inward and remembering the truth of who we are, and get in touch with that wholeness of the human experience—and not just the pretty parts—we can more easily see that and recognize that in other people, too." Because beauty, it turns out, is not something we see with our eyes at all. It's felt from within.

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> "Whether we're running a studio or we're a teacher, our decisions can be human centered rather than profit centered."

WARDROBE: SWEATER AND TANK: COURTESY OF AERIE; LEGGINGS: COURTESY OF DK ACTIVE

Practice with Amber

Karnes created this sequence to approach Natarajasana (Lord of the Dance Pose), one of her favorite postures, in a new way: It's less about creating a "pretty" pose and more about exploring sensation and muscular action. Stay in each pose for 5–10 breaths, depending on what feels supportive to your body. Finish with some forward bends and twists.

1. MARJARYASANA-BITILASANA (CAT-COW POSES)

2. WALL CLOCK

3. VIRABHADRASANA II, DYNAMIC (WARRIOR POSE II)

4. BHEKASANA, VARIATION (FROG POSE)

5. BHUJANGASANA,VARIATION (COBRA POSE)

PHOTOS: AVIV RUBINSTEIN; WARDROBE: COURTESY OF DAY WON; LEGGINGS: COURTESY OF DK ACTIVE

MAT VERSION (shown on left)

1. MARJARYASANA-BITILASANA | Cat-Cow Poses
From Tabletop, bring a block or folded blanket under one hand to play with an asymmetrical version of Cat-Cow. Inhale, and lift your tailbone. Let your belly drop toward the floor, pressing your hands down, lifting your chest, and looking upward. Exhale, curl your tailbone under, arch your back, and let your chin drop toward your chest. Try the prop under your other hand or below a knee, noticing how it changes your experience of the pose.

2. WALL CLOCK
Stand with your left shoulder facing a wall, arm overhead, palm pressing into the wall. Turn your body away from the wall until you feel a stretch across your armpit and chest. Experiment with bringing your left hand behind you and down the wall at various angles/heights, like the hand of a clock. Adjust the sensation further by changing how much you turn your body away from the wall. Repeat on the other side.

3. VIRABHADRASANA II | Warrior Pose II, Dynamic
Step your right foot forward into Warrior II. Play with the angle of your back foot so your left knee feels supported. Bend into your right knee. Spread the mat between your feet. Lift your arms to shoulder height, bending at your elbows to make cactus arms. On the inhalation, squeeze your shoulder blades together, broadening your collarbones, and draw the head of your arm bones backward. On the exhalation, bring your forearms together as you round your upper back (like in Cat Pose). Move back and forth with the breath. Repeat on the other side.

4. BHEKASANA | Frog Pose, variation
Lie on your belly. Bring your right elbow underneath your right shoulder, and let your forearm rest parallel to the front edge of your mat. Use this arm to bolster your upper body off the ground. Reach back with your left hand (use a strap if you can't easily reach your foot) and take hold of your left ankle. Try to keep both hipbones connected to the ground as you pull your heel closer to your butt to stretch your quad. Adjust the sensation by bringing your foot closer to, or farther away from, your body. Repeat on the other side.

5. BHUJANGASANA | Cobra Pose, variation
Reach your arms in front of you, and bring your fingertips to the floor with your hands wider than the width of the mat. Press down through the front of your hips and the tops of your feet. Dig your fingertips into the floor, and squeeze your shoulder blades together, curling your chest and head up off the mat. Drag your chest forward toward your hands, and lift your heart.

SEATED VERSION (shown on right)

1. CAT-COW POSES
Come to a comfortable seat in a chair with your feet flat on the floor. Practice Cat-Cow as cued in the Mat Version (left) but with the block under one hand or foot.

2. WALL CLOCK
Position your chair next to the wall, and follow the pose instructions as described in the Mat Version (left).

3. WARRIOR POSE II, DYNAMIC
Sit in a chair and turn your body 45 degrees so that you're seated toward the chair's right corner. Anchor your sitting bones and keep your knees wide. Keep your legs bent, feet connected to the floor, or stretch your left leg behind you for Warrior Pose II. Practice with cactus arms and movement as in the Mat Version (left). Repeat on the other side.

4. FROG POSE, VARIATION
Sit sideways in a chair with your right thigh resting on the seat, right hip touching the back. Bring your left knee to a block for support. Rest your right forearm on the back of the chair. Lift and lower your left foot to stretch the front of your quad, or loop a strap around your left ankle and use that to bring your heel closer to your butt for more sensation. Repeat on the other side.

5. COBRA POSE, VARIATION
Sit in a chair with a block on top of each thigh. Press your feet firmly into the earth. Dig your elbows into the block, then drag them back as you squeeze your shoulder blades together and your chest moves forward through your arms.

SEQUENCE

6. PIGEON POSE, ACTIVE

7. NATARAJASANA
(LORD OF THE DANCE POSE)

8. ADHO MUKHA SVANASANA
(DOWNWARD-FACING DOG POSE)

9. APANASANA, SEATED HIP CIRCLES
(KNEES-TO-CHEST POSE)

PHOTOS: AVIV RUBINSTEIN; WARDROBE: COURTESY OF DAY WON; LEGGINGS: COURTESY OF DK ACTIVE

MAT VERSION (shown on left)	SEATED VERSION (shown on right)
6. PIGEON POSE, ACTIVE Sit on a bolster placed across the width of your mat with your legs wide. Bend your left knee, drawing your heel in toward the bolster, swinging your right leg behind you. Rest your pelvis on the bolster and tuck your back toes. Keep your back knee lifted and leg muscles active. If it's difficult to keep your upper body upright, bring both hands to blocks. Press your legs into the earth and draw them together to engage your inner-thigh and groin muscles. Experiment with lifting your back foot and alternating lifting one or both arms. Repeat on the other side.	**6. PIGEON POSE, ACTIVE** Sit sideways in a chair with your right thigh resting on the seat and your right hip against the back. Actively push your front foot down into the earth as you press your back toes into the mat. Spread the mat between your feet to engage your leg muscles. Play with the angle of your back leg to find a new or deeper sensation to explore in the front of the hip. Repeat on the other side.
7. NATARAJASANA | Lord of the Dance Pose Move your mat perpendicular to a wall. Stand firmly on your right foot between the wall and a chair with the seat facing away from you. Bring your left leg up behind you and rest your shin against the wall. Experiment with the chair position to support your balance. Press your shin actively into the wall and root your right foot down into the mat. Squeeze your shoulder blades together, broaden your collarbones, and arch your back for an active backbend. Repeat on the other side.	**7. LORD OF THE DANCE POSE** Sit sideways at a 90-degree angle in a chair with the wall behind you. Bring your left toes to the wall behind you, and press your foot actively into it. Feel the stretch in the front of your left hip. Experiment with the distance between the chair and the wall so you can bend your knee while pressing your toes into the wall with both legs active. Rest your right arm against the back of the chair for stability. Play with lifting one or both arms for the backbend. Repeat on the other side.
8. ADHO MUKHA SVANASANA | Downward-Facing Dog Pose Stand in front of the chair with the seat facing you. Grab the sides of the seat with both hands, and walk your feet backward. Stretch your hips up and back into Downward-Facing Dog Pose. Find a long spine, and take any movement that feels good.	**8. DOWNWARD-FACING DOG POSE** Bring the chair about a foot away from the wall with the seat facing the wall. Sit with both feet on the floor, reaching your arms out in front of you higher than your shoulders. Press your hands into the wall, and let your head come between your arms. Find a long spine.
9. APANASANA | Knees-to-Chest Pose Lie on your belly. Bring your right elbow underneath your right shoulder and let your forearm rest parallel to the front edge of your mat. Use this arm to bolster your upper body off the ground. Reach back with your left hand (use a strap if you can't easily reach your foot) and take hold of your left ankle. Try to keep both hipbones connected to the ground as you pull your heel closer to your butt to stretch your quad. Adjust the sensation by bringing your foot closer to, or farther away from, your body. Repeat on the other side.	**9. SEATED HIP CIRCLES** Sit in the chair and let your hands rest on your thighs. Press your feet into the floor as you make torso circles over your legs. Let your weight shift back and forth to each sitting bone as you slowly rotate your spine. Circle in each direction 5–10 times to reset the spine.

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WATCH IT
To practice with Amber, go to *yogajournal.com /amberkarnes.*