

Mark Stephens' Statement

The underlying tenet of my teaching is to create a safe space where students can explore, heal, grow, and deepen their joy and conscious awareness in life. This involves, in part, honoring clear boundaries, especially when there is any semblance of attraction, transference or projection of feelings. In 15 years of teaching yoga, I have worked with thousands of students, many (perhaps most) of whom came to yoga to heal and to gain a clearer sense of self. I have maintained positive relationships with my students and have never had a single student complain to me about inappropriate interaction, hands-on adjustments, or other forms of contact. In my 15 years of teaching, I have not experienced students complaining or expressing concern to me about any inappropriate activities or interactions, and this continues to this day with hundreds of students attending my yoga classes weekly even amidst all the negative rumors and innuendo.

I am aware of the unspecific, unsubstantiated rumors and false complaints against me. These claims are completely antithetical to my values as a yoga teacher. Unfortunately, this has not kept a determined small group of people – mostly men – from defaming my character and attempting to cause harm to my yoga business and to me. Their various claims are patently false. Santa Cruz County Sheriff's Department investigator Kelly McCoy dropped her investigation of this matter when presented with information clearly contradicting the only two specific – and false – claims formally made against me.

Everyone deserves to be treated with respect and honesty, and I strive to uphold those values in all my relationships in the world. If someone has complaints about me or anyone else that violates these values, surely they should complain. And if their complaint rises to the level of serious charges, they should make those charges formally and allow a due process for all to be heard.

What follows provides you with my best take on much of what is going on in this matter. From what I know, the effort to bring me down as a yoga teacher began shortly after July 2005 when Tim Brattan, then executive director of the Vets Hall, brought me onto the Vets Hall yoga schedule in coveted prime-time time slots, replacing Phil Lynch as he was moving to the East Coast. Several others teachers – [NAMES DELETED] – openly resented my presence on the class schedule and were quite angry with Brattan for passing them over for those time slots. Then in September 2005, I made Phil Lynch's former student and close personal friend [NAME DELETED] *persona non grata* in my classes at the Vets Hall after another student, [NAME DELETED], complained to me that he was stalking her. (Brattan concurred and supported me in this decision). [NAME DELETED] was extremely agitated when I informed him of this decision and promised to "get me."

Three years later, in November 2008, [NAME DELETED] posted a comment on Poppy de Garmo's Good Times "Karma Style" blog falsely claiming that I am a "sexual predator" who was "kicked out of L.A." for such behavior. He went on to claim that "numerous women" had made complaints to him about me in Santa Cruz, and that he was "counseling" them. GT removed the comments (I was told at the time that [NAME DELETED] comments were archived; Poppy deGarmo is familiar with this, as is Greg Archer).

On December 1, 2009, the Vet's Hall Board cancelled my room rental contract without giving me any explanation. They video-taped my eviction and the edited video tape later appeared on

YouTube along with another video slideshow entitled “The Mark Stephens Rape Video.” Lynch and [NAME DELETED] sent out emails with a link to the latter video. In the following days, Jasmine Berke sent out a mass email to over 1,500 recipients informing them that I was no longer at the Vets Hall due to “numerous complaints” that were never specified, adding that her Board had “thoroughly investigated” the complaints and had found them to be valid. To date I have never seen or heard any specific complaints except the two that were investigated and dropped by the Sheriff’s Dept.

In the days following my departure from the Vets Hall, anonymous emails were sent out to yoga students, teachers, studios and others all across Northern California carrying the same message (and exact turns of phrase) as had appeared in [NAME DELETED] blog comment. Within weeks my Facebook sight was hacked and changed to make the same slanderous statements against me. Then two yoga teachers, [NAMES DELETED], sent out email messages adding further claims and innuendo, including that I am a violent person and to be careful around me. Local yoga teachers [NAMES DELETED] exchanged a series of emails laying out plans on how to bring forth further complaints. Further anonymous emails and letters were sent to my book publisher, book endorsers, and retreat centers where I had scheduled events, all in an attempt to get them to cancel their commitments to me (all stayed with me, in some cases only after they did their own investigations).

Meanwhile, I continued teaching to packed classes at Palomar Ballroom and Loudon Nelson Center while building out a new yoga studio, Santa Cruz Yoga, in the Swift Street Courtyard. During December 2009 and January 2010, I had open forums in several of my classes in which I invited my students to share their experiences in my classes. I specifically asked for any complaints and made clear what was being said about me. I invited my students to speak to me through an intermediary if they or someone they knew had something to say but didn’t feel comfortable saying it directly to me. What I received was 100% support, this from classes of 40-50 students ten times per week...students representing a wide cross-section of the Santa Cruz community, from civic and academic leaders, college students, parents, feminist leaders, and others from the rich fabric of our community.

I opened SC Yoga in January 2010 with 12 other yoga teachers (including Melanie Vizzusi, a local teacher for over 10 years who was at the Vets Hall when I arrived there in 2005 and until recently still carried some resentment over how I was brought onto the schedule at the Vets Hall). Also in January 2010 I had a sold-out (26 participants) 7-week Yoga Teacher Training at SC Yoga. Yet as we got the studio up and running, there were daily anonymous salvos aimed at hurting the new studio. At our grand opening, held a few months later, Mayor Mike Rotkin presented me and SC Yoga with a Mayoral Proclamation, while out in the parking lot an anonymously written slanderous flyer was placed on all the cars, once again containing the same language dating by to [NAME DELETED] blog comments and [NAMES DELETED] emails.

On June 6th I did a book event at Bookshop SC for my new book, Teaching Yoga. During my talk and unbeknownst to me at the time, [NAME DELETED] and an as yet unidentified man were found plastering the same slanderous flyer on the front door of Bookshop SC. When confronted by my sister, they at first denied doing it. When she attempted to take their picture using her camera phone, they physically assaulted her in trying to get the phone away from her. However, with a crowd gathering around they ran away. She had succeeded in getting their pictures, this marking the first time that we positively identified someone distributing

anonymous slanderous statements against me. My sister called 911 and filed an assault and battery charge against [NAME DELETED] and the other assailant. This matter is presently with SC Police Department investigators.

There are some simple fact checks that will plainly contradict at least some of the slanderous claims:

- *Fired from Malibu Yoga for sexual predation?* False. Contact the owner at the time, James Hanrahan: jameshealthservice@yahoo.com. I left Malibu Yoga (and Yoga Works) in 2002 when I opened L.A. Yoga Center.
- *Fired from Yoga Works for sexual predation?* False. Contact the general manager at the time, Robin Lange: robinlange@sbcglobal.net
- *Thrown out of L.A. for sexual predation?* False. I sold my studio to Yoga Works in 2004 and had a two-year non-compete clause, which led me to move home to my native Santa Cruz. Does anyone think that several L.A.-based yoga luminaries would have endorsed my book if they thought I was a sexual predator? Hardly...and they would have known given how small the even the LA yoga communities is...people talk and most listen.
- *Sexually touching my students in class.* False. My classes are packed, my students are bright and perceptive, and surely the word would get out in my classes about any such behavior. Instead, I have innumerable students who for the past five years have brought their partners, sisters, children and friends to my classes, and continue to this day despite being abundantly aware of all the rumors.

For more perspective, you might consider talking with:

Julie Buckner, former student in LA and Santa Cruz, now owns a yoga studio in LA: 818-219-1737

Vilashini Coopan, student (and a UCSC professor): 831-459-8599

Ioana Badea, student (and a tech professional): ionica_us@yahoo.com

Ariadna Renteria Torres, student (and a lawyer): ariadnart@gmail.com

Mike Rotkin, close friend for over 30 years, 831-345-8469