

Jennie Lee



She brings compassion and joy to her yoga students in Newburyport

by **LIBBY HUGHES**

photography of Jennie Lee by **LAURA IMBEAULT**

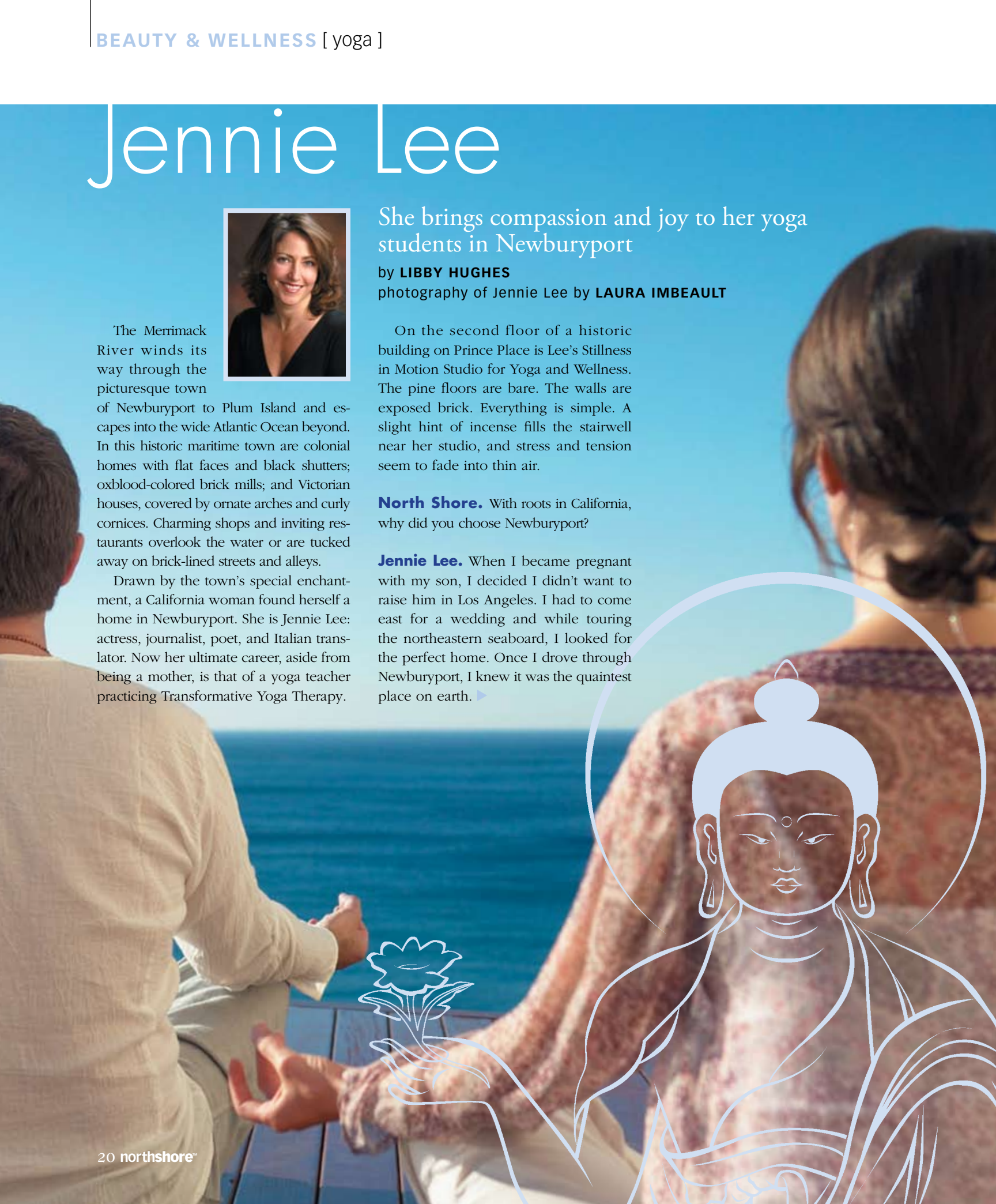
The Merrimack River winds its way through the picturesque town of Newburyport to Plum Island and escapes into the wide Atlantic Ocean beyond. In this historic maritime town are colonial homes with flat faces and black shutters; oxblood-colored brick mills; and Victorian houses, covered by ornate arches and curly cornices. Charming shops and inviting restaurants overlook the water or are tucked away on brick-lined streets and alleys.

Drawn by the town's special enchantment, a California woman found herself a home in Newburyport. She is Jennie Lee: actress, journalist, poet, and Italian translator. Now her ultimate career, aside from being a mother, is that of a yoga teacher practicing Transformative Yoga Therapy.

On the second floor of a historic building on Prince Place is Lee's Stillness in Motion Studio for Yoga and Wellness. The pine floors are bare. The walls are exposed brick. Everything is simple. A slight hint of incense fills the stairwell near her studio, and stress and tension seem to fade into thin air.

North Shore. With roots in California, why did you choose Newburyport?

Jennie Lee. When I became pregnant with my son, I decided I didn't want to raise him in Los Angeles. I had to come east for a wedding and while touring the northeastern seaboard, I looked for the perfect home. Once I drove through Newburyport, I knew it was the quaintest place on earth. ▶





NS. How did an actress and writer come to yoga as your life's work?

JL. Personal tragedies and the loss of my second child at birth sent me into a deep depression. I had been practicing yoga for nine years at that time and it is what helped me get back on my feet. I wanted to share this amazing practice so I began teaching yoga to school groups and at gyms and other yoga studios. Eventually, I opened my own studio and began developing Transformative Yoga Therapy.

NS. Did you have to take professional training?

JL. I did. I went back to school for a master's in spiritual psychology and trained for a year in body-centered psychotherapy.

NS. What exactly is yoga and what does the word mean?

JL. Yoga means to “yoke or unite.” In other words, it means to unify and yoke together body and mind. It is an ancient way of cultivating a peaceful life. It began in India 5,000 years ago. People often ask if yoga is a religion. It is not, rather it is a spiritual practice and a way of life.

NS. Are there different types of yoga?

JL. There are many, many different forms. I teach both a gentle, slow moving form and a flow style, which is more aerobic and vigorous. There is a style of yoga for everyone.

NS. How long do people take yoga sessions?

JL. There is no direct answer to that question. It is an individual decision. For many, it becomes a lifelong practice. Yoga meets you where you are. Self-judgment can be a problem—thinking you are not as flexible as someone else in the class. It is an unfair comparison, given that all bodies are different. I try to teach self-acceptance as the key.

NS. Is there mental preparation before going to the mat?

JL. It is nice if people can give themselves some time before class to focus on breathing and stretching. But once we get going the motion becomes meditation.

NS. Is Transformative Yoga Therapy your original creation?

JL. Yes. It is a process that combines yoga body openings with emotional and psychological release. I meet with people one-on-one and each session is unique. We are looking for the connections between a client's body issues and their psychology. We make correlations between chronic tension patterns and long held limiting beliefs or emotional attachments.

NS. What happens during a Transformative Yoga Therapy session?

JL. We might employ movement, dialogue, intuitive touch, intentional breathwork or mindfulness training depending on the client's presenting needs or symptoms. I assume that every person's answers are within and that the body holds tremendous information. Transformative Yoga Therapy helps people connect with their

bodies and therefore their inner wisdom in a new and intimate way in order to identify and release any blocks to freedom—physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually.

NS. Could you give some examples?

JL. Well, I have a nine-year-old client who has been bullied badly at school. We talk about how to use yoga breathing to deal with the anger he feels and I help him release the tension that builds up in his little body through yoga postures. Another client is a woman in her 60s, who had severe injuries to both ankles. Physical therapy didn't seem to help, especially with the instability that she experienced on her feet. The psychological component to this was her inability to “stand on her own two feet” when communicating with others. By teaching her postures that are grounding and ones that developed her core strength, she began to feel more confident both physically and emotionally. These shifts are why this work is transformative.

NS. Do you take annual training?

JL. Yes. This year I'm going to the Kripalu Yoga Center in Lenox, Massachusetts, where I will be studying with a shaman from Peru learning a process of energy healing. I can't wait. I look forward to it all year.

NS. What are the benefits of yoga to you as an instructor?

JL. I find such joy in my work seeing the divine spark and divine nature expressed in everyone. ■