

# Yoga instructor Valerie McMillan follows unconventional path to nutrition degree

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(Photo courtesy of Valerie McMillan)

If you've encountered Valerie McMillan, you probably already understand at least one thing about her.

She doesn't stop.

"I basically want to be Indiana Jones, but a woman," McMillan cracked.

Now approaching her final year as a Master of Public Health student in nutrition, McMillan has also gained a following within the Tulane School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine community as a yoga instructor.

But neither that role, nor her position as a Tulane grad student, came about quickly or easily. Nor does either role fully define her.

McMillan says her path to public health began when she lost her mother to heart disease in December of 2005. That event – one of the hardest things she’s been through – almost immediately began shaping her approach toward healthy living.

Daily walks, meal planning, reading labels and a transition to a plant-based diet were some of the earliest changes.

At the time, she was working as a social worker in Chicago, a role and location where she had the opportunity to observe health inequities firsthand. Seeing people struggling to maintain good health had an affect on her. She wanted to address the problem, but also not make it worse.

“I think I probably started like a lot of folks wanting to go in and save the community or change it. Like when I went to Chicago, I think that was my goal. And that lived experience, you realize what you think is right may not be what the community needs,” McMillan said. “If you ask folks on the ground what they really need [you realize] we have to learn the language, and not come to it like we have all the answers.”

The fight for good health became even more personal to her when she came back to New Orleans to work for the city in urban planning. This was also where she was reintroduced to yoga.

“I didn't think it [yoga] was for me,” she says. “I didn't think I could afford it. And I didn't think it was for me as a Black woman.”



(Photo courtesy of Valerie McMillan)

She came around, however, and gained a new appreciation for the health benefits of the discipline that combines breath control, body postures, and meditation. It wasn't long before she took it to the next level and became certified as an instructor. With that came her goal to bring yoga to more diverse communities.

McMillan launched [The Ohm Well](#) in 2015. The yoga studio is now located in the Pythian Market on Loyola, just a short walk from the Tidewater Building, and it offers a wide range of classes to the Tulane and New Orleans communities.

As interest in yoga spiked during the COVID-19 pandemic, she, too, was reevaluating her career path. Realizing that nutrition was a key element to that healthy mindset she embodied, she enrolled in the MPH program at Tulane.

"It took 20 years to come back around, for me to realize my passion is public health, basically wellness, even with being an urban planner," she said. "Does our community have sidewalks? Do we have public transportation? Can we actually exercise? Can we go to the grocery store, because all of those things are intertwined with our health.

Of critical importance to McMillan is the idea of inclusion: making people feel seen.

“I really want to change the narrative around Black woman's health,” McMillian said. “There's so many horrible statistics about heart disease. But we're out here running, walking, doing boxing, doing yoga-- this community exists. And the more visible it becomes, the more other folks will see it.

“Regardless of your socio-economic status, your ability, if you have one leg, whatever, it doesn't matter. We can find some sort of movement. It's really about community.”

The next step for The Ohm Well program is to lean into that concept of addressing food insecurity in a more aggressive manner through McMillan's own community garden, [The Well Garden](#).

With the garden, McMillan sees an opportunity to fuse good nutrition with activity to benefit communities of color and will soon offer yoga classes in the garden. Participants pay for the yoga, but then get to take home produce from the garden.

“We're in a circle, we're in community,” she said. “That's something I'm very adamant about in my classes: having everyone realize they're part of a community that they're not on the mat by themselves.”

Despite juggling a business, changing career paths, studies, passion projects, her own health and even new motherhood, McMillan's experience at Tulane has only made her more passionate about the ways she can combine her interests.

“I definitely want to continue to teach, be able to publish research, write books, travel, and do all those things. That's what I'm working towards,” she says. She's also just completed her first small documentary, “[Mind, Body & Soil](#),” and will offer yoga instructor classes beginning in March.

It's a combination of health, nutrition, and mindfulness that Indiana Jones never even dreamed of.