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The Sacred Space opens a mindful world to Miami



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This is the outdoor area of the Sacred Space urban sanctuary, complete with lush meditation gardens. **C.M. GUERRERO.** - cguerrero@miamiherald.com

BY NANCY DAHLBERG
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At the end of a gritty Wynwood street backing up to railroad tracks, an oasis beckons. Once inside the gates, a garden of native and exotic plants invites people to meditate or relax. Inside the building, an entryway minimally adorned with art opens to several large event spaces, which can be divided for more intimate gatherings. Underfoot are soft wood floors suitable for Prayer Dances, and no expense was spared for lighting and acoustic technology to unobtrusively enhance an event.

The Sacred Space Miami, a 12,000-square-foot center for healing and well-being on nearly an acre of property, opened its doors early this year with a full schedule of classes and workshops, as well as a plant-based restaurant and culinary institute. But the $10 million center is really the culmination of founder Karla Dascal's 11-year personal journey into mindful living.

[**Read more:** Startups out to build a mindful Miami]



Back then, in 2005, the veteran event planner was obese and diabetic. Gastric bypass surgery helped her shed pounds and her diabetes, but she was still not eating well.

"I wasn't of the mindset. I was a mess."

A friend introduced Dascal to juicing and she undertook a raw diet, too: "I cut out everything, I went back to nature. I felt cleansed, clear, energized."

Her event's company, Karla Events, was thriving inside a Wynwood warehouse she purchased in 2000 and then renovated, as she continued her own journey into personal well-being, including yoga and meditation. But she was also beginning to notice her clients were increasingly requesting mindful or wellness-related events, something for which her own space or other venues in South Florida weren't ideal.

Karla Dascal is the founder of The Sacred Space Miami, a multimillion dollar urban sanctuary that includes event companies and spaces, food companies, and workshops on meditation and wellness. **C.M. GUERRERO.** - cmguerrero@miamiherald.com

Then the recession of 2008 hit her event business with a thud.

THE $10 MILLION CENTER IS REALLY THE CULMINATION OF FOUNDER KARLA DASCAL'S 11-YEAR PERSONAL JOURNEY INTO MINDFUL LIVING.

She had to let go of half her company's employees, many of them long-timers. Yet the recession also gave Dascal the opportunity to travel and meet teachers and healers and visit wellness communities around the country.

"I met some of our greatest teachers in this journey — Debbie Ford, Deepak Chopra, Marianne Williamson — and visited every raw and vegan restaurant in the country. I was on a holistic path ... and as I met all these people, I invited them to this space to do their thing."

She invited locals, too. The founder of Jugo Fresh held his first dinner event there, before the company took off, Dascal said. Conscious Bite Out, a conscious dinner pop-up experience, began holding regular dinners there. YogArt held fundraisers.

That's when Dascal set her sights on redeveloping the warehouse, what she formerly called The Space, into The Sacred Space, with architect Rene Gonzalez.

"I said, you know what, this is my lifestyle, this is what I want to teach, this is what I want to bring to Miami," Dascal said. "I was already building the conscious community. We put a spiritual movement practice here called Prayer Dance, which was led by my life coach who helped me tremendously on this entire journey. ... I wanted to bring this to Miami."

Along the journey, she partnered with celebrity chef Matthew Kenney, who raised appreciation for plant-based foods on the culinary scene. They built Plant Food + Wine restaurant and his Miami culinary education program, both housed in The Sacred Space.

"To me it was not about opening a restaurant, it was about bringing this education component to Miami. You could sign up for a class and learn how to prepare foods this way," Dascal said.

Completely redesigned, The Sacred Space reopened at 105 NE 24th St. in January. The restaurant and WiFi-equipped garden, which can be rented for events too, opened a month later.

Both self-funding and bank financing were used to build out the space and deliver programming to the community. Land acquisition, construction, operations and marketing for the launch of The Sacred Space came to about $10 million, Dascal said. There's room for expansion, and Dascal plans eventually to add a small boutique hotel to the campus, catering to the visiting mindful community and for hosting retreats.

"WE ARE CREATING A CENTER FOR HOLISTIC TRANSFORMATION. IT'S NOT FOR THESE WHO NEED IT, IT IS FOR THOSE WHO WANT IT.

Karla Dascal, founder of The Sacred Space Miami

"My goal is to be able to help a lot of people," said Dascal, part of one of Miami's well-known philanthropic families. "We are creating a center for holistic transformation. It's not for these who need it, it is for those who want it."

Sacred Space, now with 11 employees, hosts corporate and community mindfulness or meditation events and workshops, both at the space and at company offices. Doctors interested in integrated medicine have been visiting to learn more about well-being. On any given week, workshops or classes might include yoga, meditation, aromatherapy, holistic nutrition, sound healing and raw eating. It still holds Prayer Dances every Sunday. The Seed Food and Wine festival will host its Friday night chef dinner and its closing day of its five-day vegan food celebration at The Sacred Space in November.

Next month, Sacred Space will co-present Modern Life, Miami's first mindfulness festival with a full day of experiences and talks by national and local experts. Organizers expect about 500 people. (See more information below.)

NEXT MONTH, SACRED SPACE WILL CO-PRESENT MODERN LIFE, MIAMI'S FIRST MINDFULNESS FESTIVAL WITH A FULL DAY OF EXPERIENCES AND TALKS BY NATIONAL AND LOCAL EXPERTS.

"I want Sacred Space to be the epicenter for personal growth," Dascal said. "You need to be happy and healthy and holy with yourself, and if you are that way with yourself, you will have an impact on everyone else."

Co-founder Chira Cassel agrees. She said Sacred Space just did an event for wealth managers. "It's lovely to go on a retreat, but how do you incorporate it into your day-to-day life?" she said.

"And that is the point of the center. It is not just the meditators and the yogis that are coming here, it is parents, it's teens, it's professionals, bankers and lawyers. Meditation isn't just for the hippies or the self-help crowd, it's for everybody."

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NEXT MONTH: MODERN LIFE, A MINDFULNESS FESTIVAL

What: Exploring mindfulness in Miami, The Sacred Space Miami and Modern ŌM present Modern Life, a first-of-its-kind festival offering diverse practices to help counter stress and information overload of the modern world. At Modern Life, festival-goers will not only learn how to cultivate conscious living in a high-vibration environment but will also have the opportunity to connect with like-minded doers. The curated program includes activities and workshops across meditation, music, art, fitness, food, entrepreneurship and technology led by some of the most sought-after teachers in the world of mindfulness.

Who: Scheduled speakers include rock-star shaman Alyson Charles; yogi and creator of The Sonic Butterfly Harp, Andrea Brook; Founder of 1111 Vibes, Andrew Clark; founder of Center of the Cyclone, Biet Simkin; MindBodyGreen meditation expert, Charlie Knoles; founder of Creative Insight Journey and life coach, Jennifer Grace; founder of Skanda, Ken von Roenn.

Miami's community will also share their lessons and passions. Among them: Tony Cho, real-estate developer, will speak on building mindful communities. Ebony Smith, corporate coach, will offer a workshop on mindful leadership. Paul Toliuszis, famed yoga teacher, will discuss Oneness. Michael Capponi, nightlife impresario, will share his deep interest in humanitarianism and mysticism.

When: 9 a.m.-11:30 p.m. Oct. 15

Where: The Sacred Space Miami, 105 NE 24th St., Miami

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Startups out to build a mindful Miami



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BY NANCY DAHLBERG
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Miami a magnet for mindfulness? Really?

If you are reading this stuck in Interstate 95 gridlock, stressed out at work, or distressed by news of yet another senseless shooting death or an only-in-Miami fraud, you may think not. But a growing number of local startups are betting the time has come for mindfulness and well-being in the Magic City.

Consider this: While yoga classes, spas and life coaches have long been a part of the scene, the past year has brought businesses specializing in serene spaces, education and training. Product companies create clothing and accessories, even reminders to be mindful. Food product companies are taking root, and farmer's markets and healthy, organic food restaurants are now plentiful, including Dr Smood, which launched in Wynwood and South Miami in December and is now on a fast track to global expansion. There's a bit of mindful-tech, too: A Miami Beach startup uses biofeedback to help you change your state of mind.

Events are multiplying, with Miami's first mindfulness festival next month and a three-day World Happiness Summit planned for March.

THE SACRED SPACE OPENS A MINDFUL WORLD TO MIAMI

"For all the superficiality that sometimes our city is known for, there is a large and growing community of fascinating people, places and companies that are

building a much more interesting and healthier Miami," said Demian Bellumio, COO of tech company Senzari and founder of a new bimonthly event series for entrepreneurs. Called Dawnings, the events begin at sunrise in different locations around Miami and include yoga, meditation, lightning talks and business networking over shots of organic ginger and apple juice or cold-pressed cucumber, spinach and kale.

To be sure, mindfulness has gone mainstream nationally and globally. Nearly 700 academic studies last year examined the positive effects of mindfulness — being in the moment — on stress, brain connectivity and chronic medical conditions, according to the American Mindfulness Research Association. And in his book "Mindful Work: How Meditation is Changing Business from the Inside Out," author David Gelles describes how companies such as Google, Aetna, General Mills, Goldman Sachs and Target have built extensive programs to foster mindful practices among their workers, from meditation rooms to coaches on staff.

ADVERTISING

Startups are clearly hopping on the mindful bandwagon to service this growing market. Still, it's hard to say what exactly a mindful business actually is, said Gelles, who also covers the topic for The New York Times.

"Rather than think about a mindful company, I try to keep the focus on employees. If folks are working with good intentions, trying to make products and services that help people and make the world a healthier, more harmonious place, and are doing so in ways that minimize personal suffering and the suffering of others, including co-workers, I think that's a pretty good start."

The marketplace is large and growing. Research company IBISWorld estimates that meditation-related businesses in the U.S. last year generated $984 million in revenue. Some of this is corporate mindfulness training, which 22 percent of employers will offer this year, according to a survey by Fidelity Investments and the National Business Group on Health. But the estimate doesn't include the hundreds of meditation apps now available like Headspace, with some 8.5 million users, or wearable gadgets that measure brain activity during meditation.

The estimate also doesn't include companion practices, such as yoga — as many yoga aficionados also practice mindfulness. Yoga's popularity also offers a case study on how big the mindful market could become. An estimated 36 million people practice yoga in the U.S., up 44 percent from 2012, and another 80 million Americans will at least try yoga this year, according to a study by the Yoga Journal and the Yoga Alliance. Already, yoga-related industries including accessories constitute a $16-billion-a-year business.

Clearly there is opportunity. "I think that now Miami is a place where people are not just coming to play, they are here to live," said Chira Cassel, co-founder of The Sacred Space Miami, one of the new businesses catering to the mindfulness movement. [See related story on The Sacred Space here.]

Cassel, who also has taught meditation and yoga, moved from Los Angeles back to her hometown of Miami five years ago, and sees a growing mindful scene: “With the influx of young professionals, I think wellness is in that same spirit. It fulfills a need for people who live here now.”

Within blocks of Sacred Space, a 12,000-square-foot center for holistic transformation on nearly an acre of property, a cluster of mindful businesses is sprouting up in the Wynwood area, known for its creative energy.

Last year, Rene Sindlev, co-founder of Pandora, today a $2.5 billion jewelry company, chose the Wynwood neighborhood to launch a restaurant chain, Dr Smood, after three years of development working with world experts. Recipes were formulated “to reach a higher level than just being organic and healthy, so it really benefits your body and mind,” he said. All the recipes and products are labeled by the mood they are created to enhance.

THIS FALL, DR SMOOD WILL OPEN THREE MORE CAFES IN SOUTH FLORIDA AND A CENTRAL KITCHEN AND FOUR LOCATIONS IN NEW YORK CITY. BY 2020 IT PLANS TO HAVE AT LEAST 50 CORPORATE OWNED STORES.

This fall, Dr Smood will open three more cafes in South Florida and a central kitchen and four locations in New York City. By 2020 it plans to have at least 50 corporate owned stores, Sindlev said.

He is also talking to potential joint venture partners in Japan, Dubai, China and South America, and envisions as many as 250 stores in total in 2020. “We want to bring healthy food to the world.”

Tucked away in the building next door to Dr Smood is the small business The Bodhi Tree House, a cozy cafe, shop and event space for holistic living, with meditations nightly, alternating in English and Spanish.

A few blocks to the south, entrepreneur Myk Likhov has set out to build a lifestyle product brand for the mindful. He launched Modern ŌM in January, but it’s not his first mindful business. In 2007, at age 26, Likhov founded the successful Green Monkey yoga chain and in 2011 sold his stake to his partners.

“What I saw was if mindfulness is where yoga was in 2000, wouldn’t it be a place to get involved? And I think it will grow bigger and faster because of all the science behind mindfulness and because of all the social media,” Likhov said. Like most of the entrepreneurs interviewed for this story, he is a passionate practitioner. Since launching his product company in January, “I’ve discovered that for the mindful consumer, we are solving the gifting problem.”

Modern ŌM’s affordably priced *malas* — prayer beads — are infused with the meaning of seven chakra-based intentions. Although Modern ŌM set out to create everyday objects that people can use as reminders of how they want to live, a lot of customers are buying them as gifts, he said.

In April, Likhov launched The 7, an underground meditation studio in Miami, to continue to build the community. Next month, Modern ŌM is partnering with The Sacred Space on Miami’s first mindfulness festival, called Modern Life, on Oct. 15. [See more information below.]

Likhov said he has been working with mindful and entrepreneurial organizations to make Modern Life an interesting, thoughtful community event. In addition to top meditation teachers sharing their wisdom, there will be workshops on sex and intimacy, spirituality, humanitarianism and building mindful communities. Other tracks will focus on mindful tech and mindful entrepreneurship, too, and of course experiences, Likhov said. “Frankly people really need it right now. We are bombarded with information,” he said.

> **WE USE TECHNOLOGY TO CREATE INTERACTIVE PERSONAL EXPERIENCES THAT PRODUCE A POSITIVE CHANGE IN WELL-BEING.**
>
> Patrick Hilsbos, founder of Neuromore

Across the causeway in Miami Beach, Patrick Hilsbos has founded Neuromore, which creates brain-enhancing technology designed to empower its users to change their state of mind. "We use technology to create interactive personal experiences that produce a positive change in well-being," said Hilsbos, a software architect for Fortune 500 companies who moved from Stuttgart, Germany, in 2013. At a recent Dawnings event at Wynwood's The LAB Miami, he gave participants a sample of the multimedia experience.

Over the company's two years of R&D, which involved the University of Miami's Miller School and other universities, Neuromore has worked with experts in neuro biofeedback. Hilsbos said he was bothered that this technology was only available to a small number of athletes and executives: "We as a company are committed to making all that knowledge applicable and accessible to all of us."

Neuromore has a free consumer app for that, as well as a professional brain-training product. The Neuromore app, available for iOS and Android, aims to help consumers get into the right mindset or state of focus or even have more restful sleep; it was soft-launched with early adopters this summer.

"What the app currently offers is just a tiny, tiny little bit of what we want to offer down the road. It really becomes a game changer when we start adding biosensors," Hilsbos said.

On the side, Hilsbos started a "consciousness hacking" meetup group for mindful techies in December. "To be honest, I had low expectation, but we have more than 500 members. We had 80 show up in our last meetup. ... I think most people look at Miami and the Beach as a party city, but the growing mindful community is a beautiful thing. There is really something going on."

Indeed, a few South Florida mindful startups are beginning to hit their stride. "A cold pressed green juice may seem like the current health trend, but once someone starts incorporating juices into their life they begin to understand that is it not a trend but a lifestyle," said Tatiana Peisach, founder of Cold Pressed Raw, a Miami-based organic juice company. "This is exactly what happened to me."

Peisach said she gained weight in college and suffered from severe migraines. She found relief in lifestyle changes that included cold pressed juices, and after college, set out to make her own.

"I saw that we could bring this niche product to a wider audience and look to streamline production and achieve economies of scale. That would make my juices more competitive than what you could put together at home while keeping the quality and benefits that I had found as a consumer myself," she said. Four years later, CPR is a well-known local brand.

Cold Pressed Raw, now with 20 employees, is available at all Panther Coffees, the Faena Hotel's spa, Equinox in Brickell, Williams Island Spa, The Wynwood Yard, Miami International Airport and through its own vending machines. It is an active sponsor of community events.

To create a name in a saturated market, "we have leveraged opportunities by integrating manufacturing, distribution, wholesale and retail to create a 360-degree business," Peisach said. To increase accessibility, Cold Pressed Raw now is available through on-demand delivery services UberEATS and Amazon Restaurants.

In Hollywood, husband-wife team Mark and Dawn Oliver created YOGiiZA, an organic athletic yoga-inspired clothing brand launched in 2012. Mark Oliver, a yoga instructor, noticed that yoga apparel wasn't being made with ecological awareness. It wasn't made with natural fibers and it didn't breathe. So the couple created their own. The men's pants are their best sellers.

YOGiiZA's apparel collection, made primarily with organic cotton, is sold primarily online at www.yogiiza.com. But this year, the company has licensed the brand for towels and sheets for hotels, restaurants and spas.

"For every 100 hotel rooms, if you change to organic linens, you save about 25,000 pounds of carbon out of the atmosphere and 8,000 pounds of chemicals every year," Dawn Oliver said. "Our mission has always been to give customers a choice that helps to save the planet. With towels and linens, we can do far more volume. Everything we do is mindful."

LUIS GALLARDO'S BIG GOAL: TO MAKE THE MIAMI AREA THE "CAPITAL OF HAPPINESS."

Luis Gallardo hopes South Florida's mindful companies as well as well-being practitioners, foundations, social entrepreneurs and academics will gather in March at his new company's first annual World Happiness Summit. The inaugural event, slated for March 17-19, will focus on "the key elements of well-being with the goal of increasing global happiness," said Gallardo, who is spearheading the event. The three days will be followed by an 18-day virtual conference to continue the collaborations.

Gallardo's big goal: to make the Miami area the "Capital of Happiness." The summit will bring together experts in happiness and mindfulness science as well as philosophers, positive psychologists, spiritual leaders, economists, policy makers, journalists and cultural icons, he said. Confirmed speakers include peace broker Ravi Shankar and media personality Ismael Cala.

"We are creating a movement dedicated to increasing awareness on happiness as a life choice," said Gallardo, a branding strategist and adviser who was a former global chief marketing officer at Deloitte. "It is important to understand that happiness is reached through a holistic combination of abstract elements, like mindfulness and virtue, and material elements like work, personal liberties, good governance and social bonds."

Gallardo is partnering with the United Nations International Day of Happiness (March 20), Bhutan's Gross National Happiness Center, Kellogg Innovation Network, The University of Miami, Greater Good Science Center at University of California, Berkeley, Mindfulness Without Borders, Action for Happiness, The Institute for Global Happiness, GoodThink and Wholebeing Institute, among others. In addition to speakers and workshops, the event will aim to hold one of the world's biggest yoga activations on Miami Beach and a huge dance party of Zumba enthusiasts, and those events will be free. [See more information below.]

But in an age where the mindful moniker seems to be slapped on all kinds of businesses, how much is too much? The Washington Post founder and former executive director of the University of Massachusetts Medical School's Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care and Society and widely considered the father of the modern mindfulness movement, if mindfulness is being over-commercialized. "I don't feel particularly good about it," he said. "When something becomes hot in our society, everyone is an expert and wants to commodify it and make money from it."

There's a risk that as more companies use the word "mindful," its very meaning might be lost.

"Already we have mindful meats and mindful mints. What's to stop a company from making mindful bullets or mindful cigarettes? That said, I'm still broadly supportive of the movement," Gelles said. The author is a mindful practitioner who has studied Buddhism in India. "I'd rather have people trying to be mindful than trying to be harmful."

Nancy Dahlberg: 305-376-3595, @ndahlberg.

READ MORE: The Sacred Space opens a mindful world to Miami

READ MORE: How millennial tastes shape a new generation of food startups

NEXT MONTH: MODERN LIFE, A MINDFULNESS FESTIVAL

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Who: Scheduled speakers include rock-star shaman Alyson Charles; yogi and creator of The Sonic Butterfly Harp, Andrea Brook; Founder of 1111 Vibes, Andrew Clark; founder of Center of the Cyclone, Biet Simkin; MindBodyGreen meditation expert, Charlie Knoles; founder of Creative Insight Journey and life coach, Jennifer Grace; founder of Skanda, Ken von Roenn.

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When: 9 a.m.-11:30 p.m. Oct. 15

Where: The Sacred Space Miami, 105 NE 24th St., Miami

Cost: $59-$69 for half-day passes; $109 for full day (prices rise $10 in October)

Tickets/more information: www.modernlifefest.com

NEXT SPRING: WORLD HAPPINESS SUMMIT

What: A three-day conference followed by an 18-day virtual event featuring experts in mindful living, including executives, spiritual leaders, psychologists, government leaders, academics, authors and foundations. The conference will also feature free events, such as the world's largest yoga gathering and group meditation and a giant Zumba dance party on the beach.

Who: Ismael Cala, media personality; Sri Si Ravi Shankar, spiritual leader and founder of the Art of Living Foundation; Ravi Shankar, who helped broker the peace deal between the Colombian government and the guerrilla movement FARC; Shawn Achor, corporate trainer and positive psychology advocate; Michele Gielen, author of "Broadcasting Happiness"; Kike Santander, Grammy-winning composer and record producer; Jennifer Moss, co-founder of Plasticity Labs; Alejandra Llamas, Mexican-American author of the "Art of Self Awareness," among others.

When: March. 17-19, 2017, followed by an 18-day virtual conference

Where: Fillmore, Miami Beach

Cost: $999 to $1,699

Tickets/more information: http://www.happinesssummit.world/

MINDFUL NUMBERS

$984 million: Revenue generated by meditation-related business in the U.S. last year.

22%: Percentage of employers that will offer some kind of mindfulness training this year.

$38.3 million: Amount of venture capital raised by Headspace, creator of a meditation app.

8.5 million: Number of people using the Headspace app.