

What do sachets in the South Bronx, a dilapidated Kentucky town, a neighborhood's first yoga studio, and 10,000 daffodil bulbs have in common? Four women who have made an art of restoration. **AMANDA ROBB** on how they renewed their work, themselves, and others.

The Rescue Squad

Photographs by Brian Doben



Teresa Kay-Aba Kennedy at Ta Yoga House, the first major yoga studio in Harlem.



Teresa Kay-Aba Kennedy

After graduating from Wellesley College with a double major in sociology and studio art, Teresa Kay-Aba Kennedy earned an MBA from Harvard Business School. At 24 she went to work for MTV—often working until 1:30 in the morning—and quickly became a vice president. Everyone was impressed, except Kennedy's parents.

"My mom kept saying, 'Honey, ease up.' My then boyfriend said, 'You need balance.' But I thought that was an evil word." Then Kennedy's body gave out. First she lost 20 pounds because of Crohn's disease (an inflammatory bowel disorder). Once she recovered from that, she visited Brazil, where she took an aerobics/martial arts class and injured a disk in her back. After conventional medical treatments put Kennedy back on her feet, she tried a gentler approach to maintaining her health: practicing yoga and eating natural foods, both of which her mother had done since the 1970s. She challenged herself with her father's three-question mantra: "Who am I? Where am I? And what must I do to be me?"

Soon Kennedy began feeling well instead of just successful. She abandoned corporate life to pursue a new career. She discovered that New York City had more than 100 yoga centers but not a single major studio in Harlem. Kennedy approached empowerment zone leaders to secure a debt commitment for her idea—a yoga and wellness center. It was a tough sell, she says: "I had to convince them that black people do yoga." She told community leaders that many African-Americans took classes elsewhere in Manhattan and that the few yoga classes then offered in Harlem—at a church and at a hospital—were well attended.

Kennedy opened the Ta Yoga House in 2002 (*ta* means "earth" in Egyptian). "At first I taught all the classes," she says, "but I realized I was becoming a type A yogi, so I hired a staff." The center serves about 500 people, many for free. To make money, Kennedy teaches wellness techniques to corporate executives at company retreats. "My dad now suffers from Alzheimer's disease, but he still challenges me with his three questions," Kennedy says. "Finally, I'm in balance enough to answer."

HAIR AND MAKEUP: KATRINA BORGSTROM FOR PRICE INC.; TOP: CHI BY CAROLINA HERRERA; PANTS: DANA BUCHMAN.



Article first appeared in July 2004 issue.

Then... selected to be in Oprah's book, Sept. 2005.

