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## Midwest Yoga Conference

by [Cara Jepsen](#)

When Detroit area yoga studio owners Jonny and Milla Kest launched the Midwest Yoga Conference eight years ago, there was only one other game in town — the Yoga Journal Conference — and it took place in Estes Park, Colorado.

“At the time, they were only inviting certain teachers. They were more Iyengar-oriented,” says Jonny Kest, owner of Jonny Kest Center for Yoga. “I thought it’d be beautiful to have a regional conference and be able to break that kind of monopoly and invite teachers that no one had ever heard of, but were masters at what they were doing.

“I invited national teachers” — such as Ana Forrest, who’d never taught outside of her L.A. studio before attending an early MWC. “I think that’s what made our conference special,” says Kest.

Kest (and his yogi brother Bryan) met Forrest when she stayed at their home in Hawaii when they were teenagers. They learned yoga from their father, and Kest started teaching yoga to his high

school education class after spending three months studying yoga in India. "My gym teacher is still taking classes from me," he says.

The conference has also introduced students to such teachers as Aundry Lappa, Sarah Powers, and her teacher, Paul Grilley. Before being invited to the conference four years ago, the Oregon-based Grilley had considered giving up teaching.

"There wasn't much interest in yin yoga, which is what I was doing," explains Grilley. "People wanted power yoga and ashtanga yoga, and people consider anatomy to be boring and irrelevant — and those two were my specialties."

The conference helped re-charge his career, and this year his teacher, Paulie Zink, will make his first-ever conference appearance at this month's event.

Zink, a martial arts champion, has been teaching Taoist Yoga in Montana and the west coast for the past 30 years. He spent a decade learning the Chinese form from his monkey kung fu teacher, Cho Chat Ling, in the 1970s.

Zink has added his own variations, and Yin is just one aspect of the style — which incorporates chi, meridians, breathing and yang movements. "Even though the postures seem like hatha poses, they flow in a completely different way," he says.

This year's theme is "The Practice of Being Present," and other guests include well-known regulars Liliias Folan, Rama Berch and Beryl Bender Birch, as well as local teachers Quinn Kearney, Daren Friesen, Chad Satlow and Jim Bennitt.

New this year are Eddie Modestini and Nikki Doane, who specialize in body alignment and mechanics, and Sean Johnson from New Orleans — who plays live music while he teaches his classes. "I think he's going to be one of those like Paul Grilley and Ana Forrest," says Kest.

But he's most excited about paraplegic yoga instructor Matthew Sanford, author of *Waking: A Memoir of Trauma and Transcendence* and founder of the non-profit Mind Body Solutions. The book details his journey since a car accident killed his father and sister, and left him without the use of his legs at the age of 15. "He's really inspiring," says Kest, who will also teach at the conference. "And not just to other paraplegics but to everyday people to do yoga and transcend their liabilities and disabilities. That's what a yoga conference is about for me — inspiring people to transcend their limitations and old conditioning and move beyond their old boundaries."

Yoga Journal now offers a more diverse roster at conferences in a handful of locales — including a bi-annual one in nearby Lake Geneva that takes place within a few weeks of the Midwest Conference. "It's kind of ridiculous to have two conferences in the same month 50 miles away from each other," says Kest. "But we're hanging in there."

"We're proud of the conference. It's another venue for people to express themselves, and they don't necessarily have to fit a certain mode."

The conference takes place May 29-June 3 at Indian Lakes Resort in Bloomingdale, IL. For more

visit [midwestyoga.com](http://midwestyoga.com).

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