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‘Laughter yoga’ group hopes to bring healing

By ALLEN JOHNSON JR.

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NEW ORLEANS — Some two dozen people burst out laughing at an Uptown yoga studio Saturday morning.

And the crowd yukked it up for at least another half-hour during a day-long “laughter yoga” training seminar.

Sponsored by the Laugh Angeles Foundation, a charitable project of the American School of Laughter Yoga in Los Angeles, the seminar is one of the few (deliberately) comic relief efforts to reach New Orleans since Hurricane Katrina.

“That’s my first belly laugh of the day!” a heavysset woman in a blue pantsuit said, smiling widely.

Bruno Teyssandier couldn’t be happier.

N.O. makes room for laughs in chaos

He owns the Yoga108 Studio, site of Saturday’s happy fracas and one of several hosts to the Laugh Angeles Foundation’s weekend goodwill tour of the New Orleans area.

A native of France, Teyssandier said he opened Yoga108 Studio in 2005 — six months before Hurricane Katrina flooded most of the city. He did not reopen until six months after the storm passed.

Nearly two years later, the city’s recovery has stalled. Billions of dollars in federal aid is still tied up in government red tape. And laughter, post-Katrina?

“There’s not much, to be quite honest with you,” said Teyssandier. “It was a big downer to be here for a while.”

But on Saturday, his mirrored studio reflected a roomful of laughter.

Led by Sebastien Gendry, founder in 2004 of the American School of Laughter Yoga at Los Angeles, the New Orleans audience stood in a circle and clapped in unison:

“Ho! Ho! Ha! Ha! Ha!”

In another exercise, Hilary Kimblin, a “certified Laughter Yoga leader” urged participants to form a “laughing car wash,” then took turns running through the gantlet.

“I like the faces we make,” said Marina Meza, 22, a recent graduate of Loyola University in New Orleans, whose apartment was looted after Katrina. “It’s pretty ridiculous to see a bunch of adults looking like 5-year-olds, but it’s fun. People in New Orleans definitely need it right now.”

Michael Barry, 52, a psychiatric social worker and native New Orleanian, hopes laughter yoga will prove therapeutic.

“As social workers, we are always looking for new tools to work with our patients,” Barry said, during a lunch break. “Also, it’s a way to take care of myself. Since Katrina, I have dealt with a lot of people who have had a lot of losses: people losing houses, losing family members, the loss of friends who have moved away.”

He attended another Laughter Yoga session Friday evening, which he declared “very energizing.”

Acting silly is only part of laughter yoga. Sessions include a balance of stretching exercises, deep-breathing — and deliberate giggling.

Gendry, also a native of France, earnestly describes the method as a “simple and accessible healing technique” for stressed-out populations, such as emergency responders, disaster victims, prisoners, at-risk youths and crime-weary cities.

“The crime rate is high in New Orleans because there is a lot of pain and stress that hasn’t found a positive constructive channel,” Gentry said.

Today, the Laughter Yoga method is practiced at more than 5,000 Laughter Clubs in 55 countries. The clubs are nonprofit, nonpolitical, nonreligious, and not competitive, advocates said. Everyone is welcome regardless of gender, age, physical abilities, social or economic backgrounds, laughter “team” members said.

“Laughter exercises are not rocket science,” Gendry said.

But in post-Katrina Louisiana, getting a laugh can be daunting, even heartbreaking.

Rodriguez, the press secretary for Laugh Angeles, recounted how FEMA eagerly accepted the group’s offer to introduce Laughing Yoga to children in hard-hit lower Plaquemines Parish on Friday.

Awed by the devastation during the drive south of New Orleans, the yoga team pulled into an austere FEMA trailer park, devoid of

trees and grass, Rodriguez said.

About 20 children, ages 3 to 14, were assembled with the help of YMCA volunteers. “During one of the laughing exercises,” Rodriguez said, quietly, “some of the children began crying; they said it was because they had not heard laughter in a long time.”

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