

Amber Karnes: Hey everybody. It's Amber Karnes, founder of Body Positive Yoga. You can find me online at [BodyPositiveYoga.com](http://BodyPositiveYoga.com) where I've got a blog with a ton of free resources, The Body Positive Clubhouse, which is a monthly subscription site where you can get yoga classes, self-care, and self-acceptance materials, and lots more inside a private, supportive community of like-minded folks just like you. Today, I'm really excited. We have Justin Mastin, who is the creator of YogaQuest, which you're going to hear all about later. Justine, welcome to the podcast. Thanks for being here.

Justine Mastin: Thanks so much for having me.

Amber Karnes: I'm excited to talk with you today. We'll kick it off by ... Just tell us a little bit about you and the work that you do in the world. Who are you? What do you spend your time doing?

Justine Mastin: Okay. As you've said, I'm Justine Mastin. I also go by the moniker "Justinie Yogini." And in the world, I am the fearless leader of YogaQuest, which is a yoga business that links together movement with narratives for really unique experience. And we'll talk more about that. And I'm also a psychotherapist in private practice, and I use narrative therapy in my practice.

Amber Karnes: Awesome. Tell us your yoga story since you're the leader of YogaQuest. We'll talk about YogaQuest in detail, but what about you? When did you find yoga? What was your first class like? What kept you coming back?

Justine Mastin: I have kind of a long yoga story. It goes back to the 80s. I went to my first class with my mom when I was a kid, and I was in dance for most of my young life. For me, the type of yoga that we went to, which was ... It was a really standard hatha class. Not that I knew that at the time. But it didn't resonate for me. I felt like it was too slow, because, you know, I was a dancer. We need to pick up the pace and stay on the beat.

So, it really didn't resonate for me at the time. And I came back to yoga a few times. I tried again in college for my PE credit. I took a yoga class. That was ... It was fine. I mean, it was a PE class, right? I learned how to properly use props, so at least they were doing that. But, again, it didn't really ... I was doing it because ... Everybody's doing yoga, right? So, I just do yoga. And it still didn't resonate.

When it finally stuck, I was probably 22 or 23, when one of the big box studios opened here in Minneapolis and I discovered hot yoga. And at the time it was just really what I needed. I loved the heat. I loved sweating. And ...

Amber Karnes: Yeah. It gets cold up there in Minneapolis.

Justine Mastin: It really ... It gets cold up here. You cannot even imagine how exciting it is to go into a 105 degree room in Minneapolis. But it really resonated for me, and I was like, "Okay. Now I get it. Now I get it." And my practice looks a lot different than

that today, but at the time, that's really what hooked me in and made me think, "Oh, yoga can be different than these other experiences that I had. It can look different."

Amber Karnes: Right. And then you created a type of yoga that looks really different from what most people are doing. Tell us about YogaQuest. What is it? How did it start? Where did it come from? What prompted you to create it? What does it look like if somebody comes to a YogaQuest experience? What can they expect?

Justine Mastin: Where YogaQuest comes from ... As I mentioned, I was practicing at one of the big box studios, and I got my training through them, and talk there for a while. And while I was teaching there, I felt like something was missing. Like, there was a part of me missing. And it just so happened that that same year, I went to my very first Comic Con. I was looking around. And at the time ... This was late 2010 or early 2011. There was not the conversation around geek wellness that there is now. Not that this is a super robust conversation now, but at least it's happening.

And at the time, it wasn't happening at all. So, looked around, and I saw all these people kind of chilling, and I was like, "Why aren't we talking about how these folks can take care of themselves in an authentic way? Not in a shaming way." Because there's plenty of narratives around how geeks need to get out of their parent's basement and put down the Mountain Dew. That's a prominent narrative. But there wasn't a narrative of, "Hey, you matter. And here is a safe space for you to move your body and really embrace having the body that you have."

And so, at that convention, I literally just made this commitment to myself that I was going to find a way to bring yoga to the geek community. Since yoga was the skill that I had at the time ... Yoga came before my psychotherapy training. And I just set to work, trying to figure out how I could make yoga not just accessible, but really fun for the geek community. And I went through a few iterations, and ...

This is kind of ... I'm not a very "woo" person, but this was kind of a "woo" moment. I was in Shavasana in my own practice, and it just came to me that, "What if it was like a video game? What if it was a story that we were following and the Yogis are the hobbits walking into Mordor? Or they are the boats that we're traveling in. What if it's this story that they can follow along with?" Because what do geeks love more than anything? Stories.

And I reached out to a group here in the twin cities called the Geek Partnership Society, which had a club ... They still have it ... Called Geek Physique. And I said, "Hey, I'm a yoga teacher. I'm a nerd. I came up with this idea. What do you think?" They weren't super into it in the beginning because they weren't sure if I was one of these traditional fitness people that was coming in to do all the "shamey blamey" stuff.

Amber Karnes: To whip them into shape and ...

Justine Mastin: Right. Exactly.

Amber Karnes: Yeah. Exactly.

Justine Mastin: Yeah. "I'm here with my whistle and we're going to ..." "You're going to be putting down that Mountain Dew any minute now."

Amber Karnes: Well, I think there's this whole ... Even if you haven't had the personal baggage of the geek versus jock thing, and everything, because of high school bullshit. So, that's in the back of everyone's mind, even if it's not in their personal experience. So, yeah, you're suspect.

Justine Mastin: Yeah. And rightly so, right? So, I went and I met with the person who was in charge at the time, and I think as soon as he met me, he was like, "Oh. Okay." Like, "Okay. You have a look. You are a small, skinny blonde lady," but that's kind of where the stereotyping ends, you know? I fit a particular look, but the way that I behave is so different than the kids that made fun of folks in high school, you know?

I actually had a student for many years who ... She would tell a story that when she first came to my class and she walked in, she was like, "Oh, great. One of these skinny bitches that made fun of me in high school." And luckily she stuck around and discovered that ... You know, more than meets the eye. But I get it, you know? So, where were we on the journey ... Oh ...

Amber Karnes: So, the Geek Physique. You were going to ... Yeah.

Justine Mastin: Yes, Geek Physique. And we decided to make a ... Just schedule it and see what happened. And people came. And people kept coming. And suddenly, we would have 25 people in this warehouse space doing yoga, and moving their bodies, and having a really good time. And then I got on my own space and started doing Comic Cons, and the rest is kind of history.

Amber Karnes: Yeah, it's super cool. I got to experience YogaQuest for the first time when I came to Minneapolis last year and attended your teacher trainer graduation. So, you certify teachers, too, now, which is really cool. And I just thought it was so amazing. Well, I'm a little bit geeky. I won't go toe-to-toe with any geeks at any Comic Con because I'll be destroyed. Maybe I can hold my own Tolkien-wise, but that's about it. But I'm just like ... I'm a fan of lots of different fandoms.

And so, it was so wonderful to be able to experience that part of myself. Like you said you saw a part of yourself that was missing from this experience. And have fun, and also move. It was so fulfilling and awesome. I mean, I can describe what I experienced there, but tell people ... What is the YogaQuest class like? You said you pictured the yogis being the hobbits moving through the shire or

whatever. But what ... If somebody came to a YogaQuest class, what is it like? How is it different from a "normal yoga class"?

Justine Mastin:

We have changed a little bit over time. I'll start with the traditional YogaQuest class. So, if you were to come to one of our specifically narrated classes, or you were to see me at a Comic Con, here's what you would see. What we do is we take something beloved from pop culture. Let's use Star Trek: The Original Series as an example. I will watch an episode or a couple of episodes and write up a fan fiction adaptation of it. You can think of it as the Cliffs Notes of that episode or episodes with my commentary and snark added in.

And then I'll assign yoga poses to certain words. Actions, or objects, in this script I've created. Then somebody reads the script, they emphasize words that I've posed as a sign to them, you look to whoever the teacher is for what pose to do. It's kind of like Simon Says, or if you're old enough and into that kind of thing, a drinking game.

So, you can imagine ... If we're using Star Trek: The Original Series as an example ... This is not going to be exactly what a script would look like, but you can think of, "We're going to assign horse ..." We call it horse pose. Other people call it goddess pose ... To Spock. And then we give him a "Live long and prosper" mudra for the hands. And Captain Kirk is a chair pose, and he's emoting with his hands. And Bones is really put upon, so he's going to be a forward fold, and we're going to go, "Ohm." And Scotty's always tinkering on something, so maybe you're crouching really low and pretending that you're tinkering with stuff.

So, you can imagine that the script goes something like, "Captain Kirk, chair pose, says to Spock, horse pose, 'Go get Scotty.' Crouch down. And Bones says, forward fold, 'I'm a doctor. Not an engineer.'" And obviously it's much more put together than that, but that's what you can imagine. You're just kind of ... Do the poses make sense to go from one to the other? Not always. No. You're just kind of jumping around. And I tell people on the front end to please do what feels best to their bodies and to move at their own pace. So, I encourage a lot of adaptation. And if you don't like what I'm doing, if you think a different movement is better for another character, do it. You don't have to do exactly what I'm doing. We're pretending to be characters on Star Ship Enterprise. It's already ridiculous.

Amber Karnes:

Yeah. This is not a serious business.

Justine Mastin:

Right. You don't have to worry if you think a Spock pose should be an upward salute. Like, go for it.

Amber Karnes:

Right. That's awesome. Well, I think that's really freeing, too, because we talked a little bit about this, but I'd like for you to talk about it more. In geek culture, the wellness conversation isn't always part of it, and we all sort of have baggage

around body image and being in fitness environments which often can feel competitive. So, it's cool to be able to come to a fitness environment, even though yoga can be more than just fitness, but, primarily, we're there to move our bodies, and in a way that's not competitive, that's not about striving, or obtaining, or anything like that. And so, that's such an awesome intention to be able to participate in. I wonder if you would talk a little bit more about why do geeks need their own special kind of wellness? What else about that culture spoke to you? When you go to Comic Cons and things like that, what are you hearing from people about why YogaQuest is so special to them?

Justine Mastin: I'm so glad that you used the term culture for geekdom because it is a culture. And I think that's either misunderstood or kind of not appreciated. As a psychotherapist in psychotherapy circles, when I talk about geek culture as a cultural competence, I still get sideways looks. Like, "What are you talking about? There's nothing special or unique about the geek culture." And I'm like ...

Amber Karnes: False.

Justine Mastin: Yeah, exactly. Inaccurate. Because as a lifelong geek myself, there are certain aspects of being a geek that are ... I mean, they're not unique just to geek culture, but there's kind of this cluster of experiences that are unique.

Amber Karnes: Yeah. You have shared experiences that is part of what defines culture. So, yeah, there is a thing.

Justine Mastin: Right. Exactly. Can you find these things in other cultures? Sure. But we have this particular cluster of stuff that is kind of our stuff. And the biggest one is that we're weird. And that's not a diss. That is a statement of fact. There is a strangeness that is wonderful. I never say weird or strange to mean bad. It's just different from the societal norm that we live in. And so, there was a lot of bullying for folks in this population, and feelings of otherness, and possibly isolation, depending on where they were at, whether or not there were other geeks around that they could hang out with.

I know when I was coming up, it was in a time before the internet was a big thing. So, I didn't know there was this whole world of other people that felt the way I felt about stories. That there were other people that were just weeping when they watch Buffy the Vampire Slayer. I didn't know those people were out there. And now I do. So, what I think is important about geeks having their own space is that it just feels safe and tailored to them, just like any population that has been marginalized. And I believe that geeks have been marginalized. We need a safe space to explore our own wellness narratives. And can geeks do that in a mainstream way? Of course, if it feels authentic to them.

But I tend to get folks in my yoga studio and my therapy practice who say, "Other wellness professionals didn't understand me, and they were trying to fit me into this box that I don't fit in." So, it's a safe space, just like queer positive

yoga, which, I mean, our yoga's queer positive, too. There's a lot of intersection between geeks, and queer folks, and poly folks, and kinky folks.

But they say, "I wasn't understood, and I felt like this wasn't for me. And now that I've experienced this, YogaQuest, I realize that yoga is for me." And that's been the really cool thing about becoming a teacher trainer four years ago ... That sounds right ... Is watching these folks that never would've stepped into a yoga studio who are now teachers.

Amber Karnes: Yeah, totally. Well, I think ... I spend a lot of time talking about this with the teachers and studio owners that I work with that ... Representation is so important. And sometime ... And I'm sure you've heard this before. It's like, "Why do we need separate spaces or geeks? Why so divisive, Justine?" And, like ... I've definitely heard that about, like, "Why do we need classes that are only for plus sized people?" Or, "Why do we need brown girls yoga? Or queer and trans yoga?" Or whatever the case may be.

And it's like, "Yes, the practices are accessible for everyone, but the fact is that the mainstream yoga culture is going to map onto capitalism, and sexism, and white supremacy, and all that stuff because that's how the west makes money and ruins everything." So, what happens there is that anyone who doesn't fit that dominant ideal or the dominant identity ends up on the margins. And so, when we create these experiences that do feel safe for marginalized folks ... Like, whatever that looks like ... Then they can be part of the practice.

And maybe they'll end up in those mainstream spaces feeling safe. But not initially. Initially, they may have faced hostility. But allowing the practice to look a little different, to be tailored and customized to them means that then they're going to have that positive experience of their physical body, which maybe they've never had before, especially if their body has been marginalized. And then they can realize the same benefits that everybody else has been able to experience in those mainstream spaces. So, I think it's super important.

Justine Mastin: Exactly. When people come in and they're like, "Okay. Well, I'm giving this a try again, even though I've been to other yoga classes and left feeling absolutely terrible, I'm going to give it a try." And they're able to discover that yoga can be for them. They weren't getting that message at, say, the big box studio that they went and tried out and got side-eyed for wearing their nerd t-shirts and some sweatpants instead of decking themselves out in Lululemon.

Amber Karnes: Right. Exactly. I want to shift gears just a little bit and talk about your career, probably built around narrative maybe more than anything else, as sort of the power behind what you do and the different experiences you create. So, why narrative? Why stories? Why do you think stories are so powerful and transformative for folks? And what about that has sort of made you obsessed with stories, I guess?

Justine Mastin: Yeah. Just being a geek has made me obsessed with stories. But I think ... I realized, just in the past couple of years, that narrative was the overarching thing that drew all of my work together. I also do quite a bit of writing. There is something about stories that is incredibly powerful and meaningful. And I don't want to get too into psychological stuff, but I think it is important for people to realize that storytelling is as old as time. This is something oral traditions, or cave paintings, or whatever way our ancestors told stories, they were telling them.

And there's this concept in Jungian psychology of the collective unconscious. And the idea there is we each have our own individual conscious, but that there's also this collective unconscious that is pervasive and we can all tap into it, which sounds a little "woo," but if you think back to ancient cultures who had no ability to be in contact with one another, they created stories that were so similar to one another using archetypes that just feel profoundly resonant to all people.

And you can look across cultures, across time, and those stories are so similar. So, what am I getting at? I'm getting at that stories are kind of hardwired into our DNA, and we are built to understand them and to have them resonate with us. So, why do we limit where we're allowed to tell stories and how we're allowed to experience stories? It's almost as if we get to be a certain age and we're told, "Okay. Well, time to be serious now. No more living in fantasy worlds." Well, those stories help us make sense of the world, and can help us make sense of ourselves. So, I hope that didn't get to ...

Amber Karnes: No, that's perfect.

Justine Mastin: Nebulous.

Amber Karnes: Nope. Nope. I think that's perfect. And it's a good segue into the next thing I want to talk about, which is ... We are doing a retreat together.

Justine Mastin: Yes, we are.

Amber Karnes: Which I'm very excited about. So, this retreat ... I'm "geeking out" over it, I guess would be the correct nomenclature. In November ... Or, no, October. Sorry.

Justine Mastin: October.

Amber Karnes: In October of this year, we're going to be in Minnesota, in your home state, in this beautiful retreat center called Shire in the Woods, for a Tolkien-themed yoga retreat, which I'm so excited about. And we're going to talk about some details about the retreat. But the main thing that I want to discuss with you is ... One of the themes that we're going to be using at the retreat is narrative. And we're going to be exploring things like, "The stories we tell about ourselves and how that affects our identity." And really examining maybe some stories that

we've told ourselves that no longer serve us, and how we can start to change those narrative. So, I'd love to hear you talk a little bit about that, and maybe the "work" that people can expect to be doing at the retreat around narratives. And I put work in quotes because we're going to have a blast at this thing, but ... What's that look like? Tell us a little bit more about how narrative weaves in with identity, and maybe how we can start to change that for the better.

Justine Mastin: Yeah. Whether we realize it or not, we hold narratives all the time. We hold narratives about ourselves and about the world. Many of the narratives that we hold ... If we sit and think about them, they might not be ours. And what I mean by that is ... If you think about something like the way that we see bodies. There is a narrative that comes from society that says, "Bodies need to look like this and work like this," and there are all these rules. And we just kind of accept them. Again, that's not a diss. That's just ... We're within this narrative, and we start to think, "Oh. I guess that's my narrative, too."

But if we sit with it, we can ask ourselves, "Is that narrative serving me? Does this narrative that ... If I'm going to have dessert, I need to apologize or explain myself to the waiter." That is a narrative that I see playing out all the time, and it is so accepted, you know? You need to tell your friends or the waiter that, "Well, I had a small lunch, so I deserve dessert."

Amber Karnes: Yeah. Or, like, "Oh, I worked out extra, so I can have something."

Justine Mastin: Right we have taken this narrative on and being our personal truth that this is an appropriate thing to do. And if we sit with that for a minute and ask ourselves, "Does this narrative serve me?" The answer is probably, "No, this narrative doesn't serve me. How does it improve my life to need to apologize for the way that I'm feeding my body?"

Amber Karnes: Right.

Justine Mastin: Yeah. Go ahead.

Amber Karnes: I was going to say ... And I think, too ... It's like ... Not only is it not enriching my life, but how is this narrative causing me to ... Like, you can't be present and fully enjoy this dessert that you're about to have, which ... Food is partly about pleasure, and enjoyment. If you're self-conscious about what everybody's thinking of you and your moral choice to have a dessert, and what that says about you as a person ... It's making your life worse that you're identifying with this thing, you know? That you might not even, after you sit there and examine it, believe to be true. Like, "Are people who eat dessert bad people?" Like, no. Well then, why are you performing this little skit every time of, like, "I need to make sure everyone knows that I'm not one of those evil people that enjoys dessert." You know what I mean?

Justine Mastin: Yeah.

Amber Karnes: When we sit down and really examine it. Like, "Wow. Okay. I've swallowed this, which is kind of bullshit." Like, "Why do I believe this?" So, yeah. It's so important to question that kind of stuff. Sorry, I just had to ...

Justine Mastin: No. I'm like, "Yeah! We agree." But this is the kind of stuff we'll be talking about. What are the narratives that you hold about yourself, and your life, and the world? And how we can look at them and start to question how they're serving us, or how they're harming us? And how can we start to shift those narratives to start telling the story that is really authentic to us, that we know came from within us and not from societal messaging telling us what is and isn't true.

Amber Karnes: Totally. It's going to be so awesome.

Justine Mastin: Right? It's work, but it's great work.

Amber Karnes: It's work, but it's ... I just know ... I've been doing this kind of work for myself for the last, I don't know, over a decade kind of thing. And it's so rewarding. And some of it just happens so quickly. It's literally like, "Upon examination, all this stuff fell apart, and now I don't have to worry about it anymore."

Justine Mastin: Yeah. So much space in your brain.

Amber Karnes: It's so freeing to not have to dedicate all this vigilance to make sure that you're lining up with whatever this expectation is. And maybe it's not even an expectation that I personally believe in or think is valuable, but, "Oh. Somehow I bought into this. Let me go ahead and set that aside." It's really cool to be able to do. I'm really excited to have folks joining us in this work that I know both of us do with the folks that we help and with ourselves, too. I want to talk about the retreat a little bit. We are going to be in McGrath, Minnesota. Maybe some of you Minnesota people know where that is.

Justine Mastin: Probably not.

Amber Karnes: It's north and cold in the winter is what I know about it. But we're going in the fall, and it's going to be beautiful. We're going towards the end of October. October 25th through the 28th. I am expecting wonderful fall color, because that's what I experienced last year when I was in Minnesota in October. It was really nice. So, we'll be there for four days and three nights. We're going to be exploring narrative, like we talked about. And also using the narratives of J.R.R. Tolkien, particularly *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, to escape into fantasy, but also be super present to our own lives and our own bodies.

We're going to be at this place called Shire in the Woods, which is so perfect. There's all these adorable cabins and shared lodge spaces, which we've all dubbed with different geeky Tolkien names. So, you can say in *The Prancing Pony*, or in Gondor, or at Bag End. We're going to be doing some yoga together,

so people will get to experience both YogaQuest and also body positive yoga because we'll both be teaching. And then we'll be doing this self-study work of exploring narratives. Also, every night we'll be watching one of the installations of the Lord of the Rings Extended Edition movie.

Justine Mastin:

Oh, it's going to be so good.

Amber Karnes:

It's going to be great. And then there's plenty of time also just to relax, and kind of get away from everything. We're hoping that fellow geeks will join us for this retreat. With that being said, we've really taken into consideration that you might not always be feeling the most social. If you're kind of introverted, that's going to be respected. There will be places to kind of get away and catch your breath if you need to. What else are you excited about with this retreat that you want to talk about?

Justine Mastin:

I am super excited because ... Well, for so many reasons. But what I'm especially excited about is that Shire in the Woods has all kinds of animals, including a miniature pony.

Amber Karnes:

A pony.

Justine Mastin:

Which just feels so true to hobbits.

Amber Karnes:

Agreed. I think we have to name him Bill. Isn't that required? Like, for the weekend.

Justine Mastin:

Yeah. We'll just tell the nice people at Shire in the Woods that that is what their miniature pony is going to be for the weekend.

Amber Karnes:

Correct. Like, "You can call him whatever you want, but he told us he likes to be called Bill."

Justine Mastin:

And they'll be like, "Well, we called this place Shire in the Woods. We should've known eventually the nerds were going to show up."]

Amber Karnes:

Correct.

Justine Mastin:

And here we are.

Amber Karnes:

The other thing that we've worked really hard on is to make this retreat super affordable, because I think sometimes retreats are full of people who are ... They're rich, or they can afford to take a bunch of time off work, or they can pay thousands of dollars to go have some experience. We've really worked hard to make this something that everybody can access. And so, we've got ... For a four day retreat, an all inclusive price of \$795 bucks if you want to stay in one of the shared spaces. And that includes meals, all the activities, and transportation to and from the Minneapolis airport, which is pretty awesome.

Justine Mastin: Incredible.

Amber Karnes: That's like ... I don't know. It's probably less than a third of what most retreats of this type cost. So, I'm really excited that we are able to offer that, too, because I know both of us care about accessibility, and part of that is financial accessibility, you know?

Justine Mastin: Absolutely.

Amber Karnes: And if you have a little bit more money to spend, you can get your own private cabin. You could stay in Lothlórien and have it all to yourself for a little bit more. So, there's kind of somewhere for everybody to jump in. We're so excited to share this experience with everyone. I will put the link to this in the show notes, but if you go to BodyPositiveYoga.com and click on retreats, you're going to find all the info that you need. And so, I want to wrap this conversation up, but tell us what else you're up to or where people can find you on the internet?

Justine Mastin: Ah, on the internet. You can find all manner of information about me at BlueBoxCounseling.com. And that has information on both my therapy practice and my yoga practice. And it also has links to me talking, yammering on podcasts, and books I'm working on. And then you can follow me on the social media sites @MindBodyFandom. Because I take a holistic approach to wellness, mind, body, and fandom.

Amber Karnes: Awesome. And then you just got a new space in Minneapolis, so if folks are local to the twin cities, they can actually come practice yoga with you, right?

Justine Mastin: Yeah, they can come see me.

Amber Karnes: Where can they get info about all that?

Justine Mastin: Right. That is also my website, BlueBoxCounseling.com. I call this space Blue Box Counseling and Wellness. YogaQuest falls under the, "And wellness." I would love to see folks at the studio. It's a beautiful space. And we have off street parking if that is a concern for you, which it is often a concern for twin citizens.

Amber Karnes: Totally. Yeah. So, that's super cool, and congrats on the new space and everything that you're doing. I am coming back to Minneapolis this fall, and I hope that I can drop in for a class. I know you're going to be in New York for a Comic Con, but ... I'm going to see if I can get over there and get my geek on with someone else that's teaching because you have awesome teachers. All right. Well, thanks for being here with us, Justine. I'm super excited about the retreat. Y'all look at the show notes for links to all Justine's stuff, and also information about There and Back Again, our Middle Earth themed yoga retreat, which we will hopefully see you there. Thanks for your time today and for talking with us, Justine.

Justine Mastin: Thank you so much for having me. And everybody, live long and prosper.

Amber Karnes: All right. See you.

Justine Mastin: Okay. Bye.