

# “The Drug Lady”

Drug educator Rhana Hashemi highlights importance of inclusive drug education

STORY BY ISABELLE SHI

“So you’re the drug lady.” To a passerby, the comment might have been perceived as puzzling, or even offensive. To drug educator Rhana Hashemi, however, it was an affirmation and a title she embraced.

The comment came as Hashemi walked the halls of a school during her first week of teaching in September 2017 and a seventh-grade student approached her and inquired about her work.

Hashemi shared her list of everything she wants to do with students—to hold a safe space for those curious about drugs, to effectively deal with and not judge or shame students involved with drugs, to advocate for students instead of trying to change them, to turn the students into educators—and the student neatly summed it up: she was “the drug lady.” And thus her title, social media handle, and URL came to be.

When Hashemi was in high school, drug education was stigmatized; her interest in drug experimentation was considered taboo and neither appropriate nor legal. When the simplified phrase “drugs are bad, don’t do them” was all the advice offered, she was only further prompted to explore substance use—but without the knowledge of how to do so safely. The first time she drank, Hashemi remembers, was at a hazy high school party where she matched the drinking patterns of a boy “literally three times” her size.

“I remember the sun hadn’t even gone down yet, and I was throwing up,” Hashemi recalled. “No one ever told me what one unit of alcohol looks like, so I’m over here drinking eight shots in one hour. And I kept doing it over and over again.”

Hashemi’s past with substance misuse fuels her passion to effectively help students navigate drug-related decisions and provide honest and open drug education to teenagers.

“Being fascinated by drugs is such a core part of my identity and how I show up in the world—something that was shamed when I was a teenager.”

Lies and exaggerations about the consequences of drug use took the place of honest conversations when she was younger, and to have that curiosity met with fear only made Hashemi feel as if she did not belong, pushing her to spiral deeper into unhealthy drug use instead of seeking help.

Moreover, after internalizing the narrative that she was a “bad kid” for using drugs and that “bad kids” deserve punishment, Hashemi shamed herself for the depression, anxiety, and sense of unbelonging that stemmed from her drug abuse.

As she grew up, she realized her feelings of ostracization were rooted in the lack of clarity around drug education, and how strict, unexplained prohibition of drugs only stigmatizes students and denies them access to honest information.

“Good kids also use drugs,” Hashemi said. The problem she found is the narrative of who deserves to safely use drugs—and who does not.

“The hypocrisy, the literal denial of information, and the stigma all inform why I [teach] and why I try to do this in a balanced way because I don’t want kids to feel bad for this, I want them to feel like they can talk to me about their use,” Hashemi explained.

Although hearing about a student smoking weed may be alarming from her end, Hashemi has learned to stay grounded and instead dig at the root of why that is happening.

“Really, smoking weed is not going to ruin your life. It’s the underlying problems that lead someone to smoking weed every single day that’s gonna ruin their lives,” she said. “If someone is curious about drugs, let’s empower them with information to make sure they stay safe. If someone’s using drugs on a regular basis, let’s understand why they want to alter their reality so much that they’re no longer present because that’s what all drugs do—they temporarily alter our reality.”

For Hashemi, defining moments while teaching are when students privately reach out to her during or after class.

“When the ones who need the information the most feel comfortable to reach out, that’s when I feel like I’m doing what I’m supposed to be doing,” Hashemi said.

Hashemi has worked to unpack much of her own internalized stigma in order to hold a safe space for students—with her first step as being present to herself. Through prioritizing the first hour of her day to meditate, go on a walk, and play some music and dance, Hashemi seeks self-connection in order to be present for everyone else.

“The world can just absorb all of you,” Hashemi said. “My own mental health care and my own self care is really the foundation from which I can create something authentic in the world.”

Despite her dedication, Hashemi faces the unavoidable obstacle time: she can only teach a scant amount in the four hours she is allotted by schools per year, but students are often exposed to drugs daily in their personal life or in the media.

“It is just a part of life, and one of the challenges for me is how to keep the conversation going when I’m not there in a balanced way that is respectful and compassionate, but also grounded in science and society,” Hashemi said, hoping to do so by having more conversations with parents and teachers as well as recruiting more “drug ladies” in order to extend her method to more schools.

Hashemi’s next goal is to scale up her teaching, including creating virtual tools for drug education—an idea born out of the pandemic. Last spring, when schools started to shut down, Hashemi realized the flaws of her model as a guest speaker and how it “was not sustainable for an everyday problem [like drug use],” prompting her to think about alternative ways to spread information and enable institutions to continue the conversation without her physical presence.



PHOTO PROVIDED BY RHANA HASHEMI

My fascination with drugs is core to me, which is why I take an anti-stigma approach with drug education.

**RHANA HASHEMI**  
Drug Educator

# From Seinfeld to Shavasana

Suzanne Snyder’s journey through acting to whole-student yoga instruction

STORY BY GRACE HOLMES

Suzanne Snyder—of *Seinfeld*, *Class*, *Killer Klowns from Outer Space*, and the yoga P.E. option—didn’t initially intend to become an actress nor a yoga instructor.

Snyder “fell into” acting partway through her degree at Northwestern, where she had initially intended to pursue pre-med. The unanticipated shift was made more remarkable by her shy personality, which at first seemed antithetical to show business.

“Many people like a lot of attention—they’ll get up on a table and dance,” Snyder said. “I’ve never been that way.”

Despite her preference for privacy, however, Snyder loved working as an actress thanks to the opportunities to study human behavior and observe other actors at work. On the sets of *Class* and two episodes of *Seinfeld*, it was “doing brave and daring things” with her peers that mattered, more than the big-name productions. Her greatest takeaway, ultimately, was a newfound sense of awareness and connectivity to the world.

“When you’re a good actor, you always have something that’s invisible,” Snyder said. “Maybe you can’t see with your eyes, but you can feel it. You can sense it all around you. And so that was probably one of the most precious gifts [acting gave me].”

Her acting coaches initially introduced Snyder to yoga when she was in her early 20s—a move to help her “get really in touch with her emotions,” as she described it—but it was that same invisible “something” that truly drew her into yoga and mindfulness, and that continues to color the lens through which she views the world.

“When I did yoga, I saw...how it got you in touch with that energy, that awareness of life. Like when you look at a tree, you can see a tree or you can experience the truth and see the life of the tree,” said Snyder. “I know this sounds kind of ‘woowoo,’ but we’re all energy. We’re all life, all energy, just in different shapes.”

Observing yoga’s impact on others was what ultimately led her to begin teaching. At first, she led informal classes for her children and friends, but after yoga “unionized” in 2010 with the formation of the Yoga Alliance, certification became mandatory, and Snyder decided to take the plunge to become a certified instructor.

Snyder trained for certification at the College of San Mateo—the very same college whose halls simultaneously hosted the burgeoning high school division. Snyder’s professor recommended her to former Nueva athletics director Amrit Chima as a potential yoga instructor, and Snyder was taken with Chima’s vision of physical education classes emphasizing whole student development.

“I just thought that what she wanted to create was so special, and so unique,” Snyder said.

To Snyder, the physical and metaphorical place alike are critical for effective practice. She described creating that “vessel” for yoga as one of the most difficult aspects of teaching at Nueva—after all, the yoga studio was “just some room” rather than a dedicated space. For her, the sense of place is critical to building the trust that characterizes a successful class.

“Ideally, [students] would feel that they could trust the experience and trust their peers and perhaps, maybe, trust me, so that they might try something new that they’ve never tried before and that would build some sort of confidence and courage,” Snyder said.

That confidence and trust are core to senior Theo Erickson’s recollections from classes with Snyder.

“I remember that sense of being encouraged to take risks in front of everyone, and trusting other people to catch your legs so you don’t just flip over,” Erickson said, speaking about a partner yoga exercise where students do handstands while leaning against one another to maintain their balance. “The suggestion of [the exercise] feels very Suzanne, as does the fact that people did it and that I was comfortable doing it. That feels like it really exemplifies the kind of environment she made in her classes.”

In Snyder’s view, an environment that fosters that sense of community is the ideal outcome.

“I want my students, no matter how different they are, to feel like they have a community—not just their Nueva community but a yoga community,” Snyder said. “High school is rough, right? And this is a safe place where they can feel like they belong.”

Now, even as she leaves her position at Nueva, that yoga community will remain—bolstered by the “invisible something” that Snyder has worked to bring into view.



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