

“We’ll all float on, OK” (online title “Somerville couple starting sensory deprivation tank business”)



TUB TIME
We'll all float on, OK

Local couple starting sensory deprivation business

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When Somerville resident Colin Roald lowered himself into a float tank for the first

time, he didn't expect much. A software engineer who hopes to open Somerville's first float tank business next year together with his wife, Sara Garvin, Roald had heard about 1960s sensory deprivation experiments involving submersion in water.

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Colin Roald floats in this tank, in the basement he and Sarah Garvin's Ball Square home. Roald and Garvin have approval from the Board of Health to open a float tank business in Somerville. WICKED LOCAL STAFF PHOTO BY KETHE JACOBSON

FLOAT TANK
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darkness and silence, but knew little about the modern-day float tanks growing popular on the West Coast as a therapeutic technique - and he was pretty sure it wouldn't work on him.

"My brain doesn't let go that easily," Roald said. "Letting things go and just being, it's a meditative thing I've often been interested in but I've never been able to get to."

But after splashing around for a while in the 94-degree, Epsom-salt-saturated water in the enclosed bathtub-like tank, after gradually getting used to the buoyancy that kept his face above water and settling into a position where he didn't bump the sides of the tank, Roald said something happened.

"Someone knocked on the tank to let me know it was time, and I was startled. I realized I had just zoned out. I was surprised the hour was up," Roald said.

Initially unsure how to react to Garvin's idea to open a float tank business, Roald was soon fully on board.

He has now floated half a dozen times, including several times in the tank he and Garvin set up in the basement of their Ball Square home for personal use and demonstrations.

"I definitely like the experience of getting in touch with my body, laying quietly and privately in the tank, letting myself get to a place I don't easily get to in the rest of my life," Roald said.

A masseuse with a practice in Davis Square, Garvin found floating while looking for a new way to help people that caused less wear and tear on her hands. Seeing a feature in a magazine, she was excited to try it herself - although she had a moment of hesitation.

"When I was standing outside it looking into this very dark box of water, there was some part of my brain that said, 'Are you really going to do that?'" Garvin laughed. "[But] It's a really safe space once you get in and your brain stops chattering at you."

Floating actually has a lot in common with massage, Garvin said.

"They're similar in that they both cause the body to go into a relaxation response which is really a very healing state," Garvin said. "Massage is one way of getting your body there; a float tank is a different way altogether."

Picking up the pieces

An elder model whose manufacturer went out of business, Roald and Garvin's tank wasn't easy to set up. First, they ran into trouble assembling the pieces, which had been scattered in a backyard after the owner had died - the seller didn't know if all the parts were there or how they fit together.

Garvin and Roald managed to put the tank together, partly with the help of a friendly member of the float community who saw their photo on Twitter and sent them a manual for the tank. But they ran into another problem when seeking the ingredient for the water that keeps skin from pruning and soothes sore muscles via a magnesium infusion.

"It turns out it's pretty easy to lay your hand on four pounds of Epsom salt. It's also easy to get 40,000 pounds of Epsom salt," Garvin said. "One thousand to 4,000 pounds is not an easy amount to get."

Garvin and Roald finally managed to special-order the right amount of Epsom salt through a garden supply company, before hitting another hurdle - how to keep the water at 94 degrees, skin temperature. This they solved by wrapping the tank in insulation, enabling the heater under the tank to do its work despite 50-degree temperatures in their basement.

One aspect of the project went much more easily than they had expected: dealing with the Board of Health, which after an appeal from Garvin decided a float tank business does not fall under special purpose pool regulations and will not require a health department permit.

"These kinds of therapeutic water float tanks are not covered by current local regulations, as they're not considered swimming pools with a filtration system, assessed for chlorine and bacterial levels, or considered hot tubs because they don't have water jets," city spokesman Daniel DeMaina told the Journal in an email. "The Board of Health examined materials from other parts of the country to see how they regulate these kinds of float tanks, if at all, and what the best practices are to ensure that the saline solution used in the tanks does not become contaminated."

When their business is up and running, however, Garvin and Roald will have to submit their daily log of the integrity of the saline solution used in their tanks, on a monthly basis, DeMaina said.

"That would allow the Board of Health to track any deviations in the saline solution, and provide the baseline information that could be used if there are future applications for these types of tanks or if the City needs to undertake regulation of the tanks," DeMaina said.

Garvin and Roald are already looking ahead to the business they hope to open in Davis Square or elsewhere in Somerville.

With about half their funding together, Garvin and Roald are aiming for a March 2014 opening, and a price on the lower side of the industry's \$60 to \$90 for an hour and a half in the tank.

"We want to get people into the tank," Garvin said. "We feel strongly that floating is for everyone."