



A FRIENDLY OPPORTUNITY

— *By Sandra Walters*

“TAI CHI IS A MIND-BODY EXERCISE. IT HELPS IMPROVE YOUR MOOD, ATTITUDE, CIRCULATION AND COGNITIVE SKILLS.”



Michael Reynolds' fascination with martial arts began at age 14 because he was small in stature. As a teenager, he studied various forms of martial arts, including judo, taekwondo and American Kenpo. "I liked the idea of being able to protect myself by utilizing intentional, slight movements," he admitted. So, when his friend of 35 years, Cindy Roland, looked at the Nextdoor app and noticed a free five-lesson tai chi class was being held at Katherine Rose Park on Walnut Creek, the opportunity appealed to him.

Michael's desire to participate in martial arts has evolved since his teen years. Today, he simply wants to engage in a low-impact exercise as a 70-year-old man experiencing some health difficulties. "I have lung cancer, diabetes and a jet ski motor in my heart," he explained. "I plug it into the wall like a toaster. These batteries will last 12 hours. If the power goes out, it will scare the life out of me — literally," he continued. Michael still has a sense of humor, regardless of his circumstances.

On July 7, 2021, Michael and Cindy attended the first session of this class, and they haven't missed one yet. The teacher, Vicki Zhao, prepares for the warm-ups, by playing soft, soothing music in the background and positioning herself in front of the students on the beautiful green grass. Michael stands at attention wearing a special black jacket with his heart-charger in his pocket, as he gracefully moves around lifting his hands, arms and legs, repeating the teacher's movements.

Vicki explained the physical health benefits of the workout saying, "Tai chi is a mind-body exercise. It helps improve your mood, attitude, circulation and cognitive skills." During classes, she pats her body all over from head to toe, and Michael and the rest of the class follow her lead. "These slow, gentle Chinese movements and postures open up and align the meridians of the



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she said. "This affects all major organs and every part of the body. In China, you can see many people doing this exercise in the park, and they can be in their 80s or 90s. Tai chi keeps them in good health because they are meditating and always moving."

"I would be considered a youngster performing tai chi in China because the teachers are usually in their 90s. Many can stand on one leg for long periods of time and can kick over my head because of their strength," Michael explained.

Tai chi is an ancient Chinese technique that originated in martial arts. Zhang San Feng, a Taoist Monk, receives credit for creating this exercise. Its history can be traced back over 700 years, and many believe as far back as 1,500 years. Every day, millions of individuals around the world practice tai chi, which works the entire body at the same time by focusing on breathing, visualizations and motions. Doctors recommend it to people for rehabilitation. "I played volleyball in college, and I took tai chi for recovery after breaking my ankle in practice. The doctor prescribed it as a form of rehabilitation for me, and it sped up my recovery. I've been doing it ever since. I hope more people will learn tai chi and enjoy its benefits," Vicki stated enthusiastically.

During classes, after the warm-up, they begin the most common form of tai chi, Yang Style 24 Form. This workout includes all 24 standard movements of this style. As they move around, it looks like a relaxing dance. Michael and Cindy find tai chi calming because as they exercise, they meditate, which simply includes breathing. It allows them to take a break from the hustle and bustle of everyday life,

strengthens their muscles and improves balance. Also, Michael and Cindy find the other participants extremely encouraging. "Michael was dealing with depression, but this helps keep him motivated. He feels so much better. The exercises have made him happier and built his muscles, so he is stronger mentally and physically," Cindy added.

Michael has found this activity beneficial. "I sleep better, and it clears my mind," he said. "So, I think better, too. I like the Asian culture. They don't believe in being in such a hurry. Our sports are fast, but theirs are slow and more precise. I study tai chi exercises to learn more about the different forms."



Through tai chi, Michael and Cindy have developed a special bond with Vicki. Even though they have only known each other a few short months, they appear to have known each other for quite some time. Theirs is a unique friendship. "I envision seeing a huge group of friends doing tai chi in the park and feeling better," Vicki said. Michael and Cindy, both retired nurses, would love to create more opportunities to meet amazing people through this activity. Michael feels that if he can do it, anyone can. **NOW**

Editor's Note: Join them at Rose Park on Saturdays from 10:00 a.m. to 11:00 a.m., and connect with new neighbors.

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