

Tai chi toward a better life

By Tom Waring
Times Staff Writer

► People from all over the Northeast have found a renewed sense of life and health through the Golden Breath Tai Chi program.

Somerton's Scott Newman has had multiple sclerosis for 20 years, and that was just the beginning of his troubles.

Newman, 38, suffered from stress, anxiety and short-term memory loss and walked with a cane. He was so fatigued that he couldn't get through an eight-hour work day.

About five and a half years ago, Newman began attending classes at Golden Breath American Tai Chi, at 1928 Cottman Ave.

Golden Breath differs from other forms of tai chi — postures and exercises characterized by slow, relaxed, circular movements — by focusing on the lungs and breathing.

Since taking the class, Newman walks better and is generally in better health. He is able to work full time and even teaches tai chi at an MS support group.

"The improvement is miraculous," he said. "It's put me back to a normal life."

Tai chi is about 400 years old, but the contemporary Golden Breath form was created 30 years ago by Robert Kassof.

The New York native — his students call him SiBok, meaning "senior instructor," and believe him when he says he's only 27 years old — splits his time between homes and offices in Castor Gardens and Florida. The theme of his classes is "Breathe to Believe."

"They call me the 'grandfather of breath,'" he said.

Students perform the movements standing, in comfortable clothing, in their socks or bare feet. They appear to take the art form seriously.

The benefits are immediate, SiBok said, but new movements are taught every week.

"It's meditation in motion," SiBok said. "It doesn't matter if you're fifteen or ninety. You can do these movements."

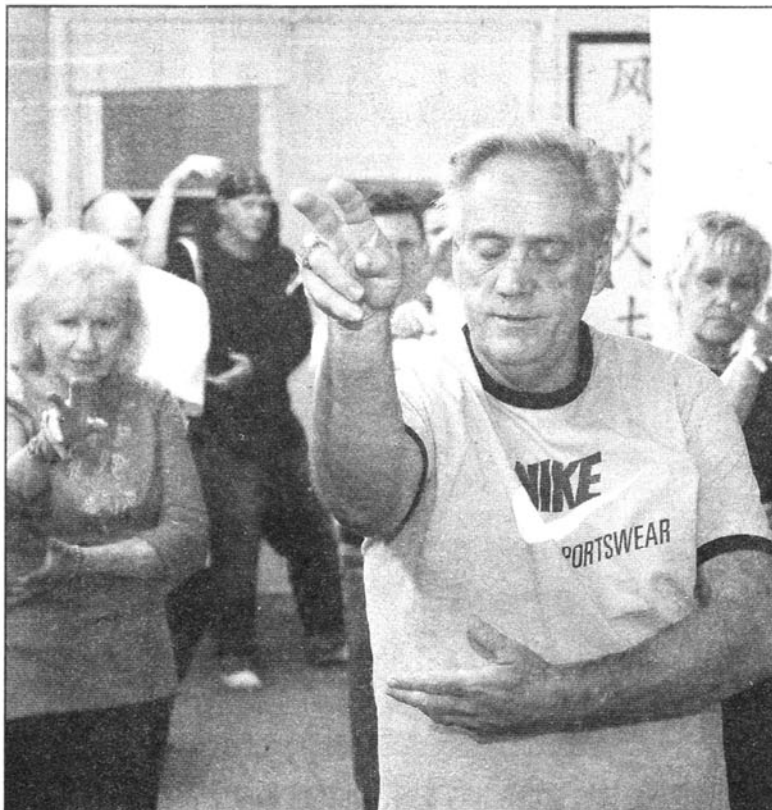
WHAT A CROWD

The classes are for the healthy and the not-so-healthy. Students include those who are immobile and even the terminally ill. There are firemen, nuns and virtually any other worker.

SiBok, who has taken his students on class trips to places such as Hawaii, Jamaica and Israel, stresses that tai chi is not a substitute for medical treatment.

However, he added that it has been shown to help people with both emotional and physical problems and addictions.

SiBok tries to create a family atmosphere. Classes are structured to proceed at each student's pace. They are offered in the day, at night and on weekends. The first class is free.



ANDRE FLEWELLEN / FOR THE TIMES

Robert Kassof, front, developed the Golden Breath form of tai chi 30 years ago.

In all, there are 22 Golden Breath schools. Besides the one on Cottman Avenue, other area locations are Center City, Mount Airy, University City and Upper Darby.

The movements are taught one at a time to ensure the proper mastery of skills before progressing to the next movement. Students are encouraged to ask questions about the movements, take over control of the class when they feel comfortable and to practice at home during the week.

"You have the best partner in the world, which is yourself," SiBok said.

Students give ringing endorsements of the class. Jeff Shair, of Bustleton, has a serious movement disorder that is similar to Parkinson's disease. He's had trouble walking and breathing, and his head used to shake.

A DISNEY WALK-THROUGH

Thanks to Golden Breath classes, he's increased his metabolism and lost weight and walks with an even gait. And he doesn't have to tour Epcot, Universal Studios and other Disney attractions in a wheelchair.

"I'm able to walk around the whole theme park the

whole day," he said.

Paul LePera, of Tacony, had a tough childhood that led to drug use. He started taking Golden Breath classes eight years ago.

Today, he's 27 and drug-free. He attended Community College of Philadelphia and later earned a business degree from La Salle University. He's working as a manager trainee at Radio Shack and teaches Golden Breath classes to hospitalized veterans, AIDS patients and Parkinson's sufferers.

The biggest benefit he experienced was self-esteem.

"I was able to feel better about myself that I didn't have to use drugs," he said.

Karen Green, a Center City resident who owns a store on Jewelers Row, has been taking classes for 12 years. Neck pain and poor posture — her head tilted to the side — made it difficult for her to work and raise a family.

Today, the pain is no longer debilitating.

"It doesn't own me anymore," she said. "I can live again. Do you know the value of that?"

Mike Maggiani, of East Torresdale, suffered two brain injuries from a motorcycle accident and a beating. He had lengthy hospital stays both times.

Six years ago, Maggiani started taking the class to help him relieve stress, deal with asthma and prevent falls. It's helped in all of those areas.

AGE IS JUST A NUMBER

Ruth Fiskaer, a Rhawnhurst resident, gets so much energy from the class that she feels younger than her 73 years. Besides that, she's met a lot of

new friends in her seven years there.

Tom Cummins, a 28-year-old from Tacony, was born with scoliosis. His curved spine made it uncomfortable for him to sleep. In his seven years taking the class, he's improved his focus, balance, coordination and confidence. And, he's able to swim, walk better and to sleep peacefully without taking prescription drugs.

Rochelle Shakü, an interfaith minister from North Wales, began taking the Golden Breath class nine years ago to help with her unsteady balance, which caused falls.

Now, she is energized and breathes better. She has the energy for business travel and is even able to kayak and climb mountains. And, she's no longer an accident waiting to happen.

"If I trip," she said, "I wind up on my feet instead of the ground." ••

For more information on Golden Breath American Tai Chi, call 215-745-4047 or visit www.goldenbreath.com

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