

DOROT Generations



Spotlight on Tai Chi Easy, a Popular Wellness Class at DOROT

BY LEAH ADLER

Phyllis Stern Brown travels from her Upper East Side home to participate in DOROT's Tai Chi Easy™, Qigong & Chair Yoga class. The 93-year-old retired clinical psychologist had been an avid deep water runner but, at 89, found that the sport was becoming too rigorous and looked for an alternate form of exercise.

She tried this class after meeting Karen Fuller, DOROT's Director of Health and Nutrition Services, at a social event and keeps coming back because she finds that the class "helps her maintain and increase her energy, strength and balance." She also appreciates the careful instructor, who is able to tailor the exercises to a wide range of participants, and the community of people she has met.

Tai Chi Easy™, Qigong & Chair Yoga is one of about 20 classes currently offered as part of DOROT's Wellness Program for Seniors. The brain child of Program Director Karen Fuller, the Wellness Program began in 1994 as a way to reduce the risk of falls by improving balance and has grown to encompass a variety of fitness and health classes specifically tailored to seniors and designed to improve physical and emotional well-being.

Taught by Melissa Elstein, a ballet dancer turned attorney turned yoga and wellness instructor, Tai Chi Easy™, Qigong & Chair Yoga is designed to increase balance, coordination and vitality and uses yoga poses to gently strengthen and stretch the body. Melissa was introduced to DOROT when she was training as a yoga teacher and assisted her instructor in teaching a class. She was impressed "with the staff's professionalism, the students' commitment, the positive vibe, and the well-rounded line-up of classes, lectures and events curated by Karen" and knew she wanted to be part of "this Upper West Side gem." When she finished her training, she volunteered as a friendly visitor and later began teaching classes.

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As the name of the class implies, Tai Chi Easy™, Qigong & Chair Yoga incorporates elements from different disciplines. Melissa created this fusion class because she feels that the three confer distinct benefits. The yoga exercises are geared towards strengthening the muscles in the legs, arms, abdominals and back and include a focus on proper alignment.

“In our modern sedentary lives, it is easy to lose muscle mass - especially as we age,” she explains. “Sitting for long periods of time (whether it is because we work in front of a computer or because we are less mobile due to aging) will generally tighten and weaken muscles, and result in misaligned posture. To combat this phenomenon, I teach exercises that the students can do at home while sitting, so their sitting becomes active rather than passive.” The Tai Chi Easy™ and Qigong practices are more subtle and softer movements that are geared towards allowing students to feel their own life force energy and to cultivate and increase that energy.

While engaging in these beautiful movements, which often emulate aspects in nature, students usually move into a meditative mode. “When we move slowly with this type of intention and mindfulness, we counter the fight or flight part of the nervous system that is often triggered in our modern, stressful lives - especially in a loud, crowded, and fast-paced city,” Melissa says. “Calming the nervous system and the mind has been shown to release healing hormones in the body, increase circulation, and improve immunity, among other physical benefits.”

The class functions as a safe and non-judgmental space for students to practice the exercises, gain physical and mental benefits, and, perhaps because Melissa’s enthusiasm is contagious, have fun. Melissa has attracted a real following; 15-20 regulars attend on a weekly basis. And the class appeals to a wide range of men and women; participants range in age from 68 to mid 90s and from novice exercisers to life-long fitness enthusiasts. Marie Wallace-Pollack, an actress who has appeared in Broadway shows, on television and in commercials, learned about DOROT from Melissa when she took one of the classes Melissa teaches elsewhere.

As someone who has always appreciated the health

benefits of exercise, Marie has been going to the gym for many years and ran in New York in the 1960s - “before the park was full of runners.” Marie enjoys the warm atmosphere Melissa creates and finds the exercises and meditative approach helpful and different from the gym.

Sydelle Gaines, an 84-year-old retired social worker, also enjoys the Tai Chi Easy™, Qigong & Chair Yoga class and, since joining, has seen significant improvement in both her strength and balance. When she began participating at her doctor’s suggestion about three years ago, Sydelle relied on a walker; after approximately six months in the class, she was able to trade up to a light cane. She now participates in other DOROT programs and classes and appreciates the “wonderful offerings” and the nice people she has met.

John Dahlose also joined the class for medical reasons. After retiring from an administrative position at Florida State University and relocating to New York in 2015, he started participating as a way to stay active and alleviate discomfort before an upcoming hip surgery. After the surgery, John found the class helpful in reducing pain and helping with range of motion. Now an assistant Program Director in Columbia University’s Economics Department, he finds the Monday morning class to be “a great way to feel energized and start the week on a high note.” He also appreciates how well Melissa explains the exercises and that she is meticulous in making sure everyone has the right form.

And it seems that the students are not the only ones benefitting. “My students are very committed to the class and DOROT” says Melissa, “and, as a result, we have formed a lovely community - it feels like a spiritual family.”

This warm, friendly environment is one of the reasons Karen often suggests the class to DOROT newcomers. “Because the exercises are not too strenuous, it’s a great place to start, both for people who have not exercised in a while and for people who exercise regularly but want to try something different,” she explains. “As a result, it tends to attract a nice mix of people of all different ages, with varied interests, and is a great place to meet people.”