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Training in martial arts helps seniors to develop greater balance and confidence



Photo by Abbey J. Porter

Student Steve Arbitman (right) works on a self-defense technique with instructor John Chen of the Ba'z Tai Chi and Kung Fu Studio in Manayunk.

By Abbey J. Porter

On a Tuesday night, in a wooden-floored room at the back of a building at 5235 Ridge Ave. in Manayunk, a dozen people face a mirrored wall. Together, they extend their arms and legs in a series of deliberate, fluid movements, breathing with the motion. John Chen, a smooth-faced man with a black and grey ponytail, calls out instructions from the front of the group. He is the owner of Ba'z Tai Chi and Kung Fu Studio, and his is not the only gray hair in the room.

Among Chen's students is Steve Arbitman, 69. "I decided I needed some kind of martial art to stay in shape, back when I was 49 and the big 5-0 was coming up,"

says Arbitman, who first tried martial arts in college. He has practiced at Chen's studio for two decades now and is one of many older students who finds martial arts worthwhile.

While the term "martial arts" might summon images of people punching and kicking each other, hundreds of martial arts exist today, not all of which focus on physical combat. Chen teaches a form of traditional kung fu, a Chinese art, that emphasizes "forms" – a prescribed series of movements meant to simulate defense against attackers. He also teaches the Chinese art of tai chi, which focuses on controlled, meditative movements, typically performed at a slow pace.

Arbitman, who holds a black belt in kung fu, notes that Chen's students do make con-

tact with each other, but it's light. "It's different from the hard stuff you see in karate," he says. "We're not in there beating on each other. We don't need to wear protective gear."

He counts confidence as the No. 1 benefit he has reaped from his martial arts practice. "It's not like I'm going to walk into a bar and beat everybody up," he says. "But I do get a certain confidence from it" – the kind of confidence, he says, where he can walk around without being afraid. He has another kind of security as well: "I have confidence in my balance. That's important for a senior." Arbitman points to flexibility and leg strength as additional benefits.

"This is a practice people can continue doing regardless of how old they are," says Arbitman, who, like Chen, has taught martial arts classes specifically for older people. "Seniors of ordinary ability can learn martial arts, even if they're just starting in their 80s."

Tai chi, with its gentle movements, is especially well-suited for older students. "I think many martial artists find tai chi at the end of their careers," Arbitman says, "because they want to continue doing martial arts but can't continue doing the things they were doing that require all that muscular strength."

A lifelong practice

Arbitman is far from alone in his pursuits, says Michael Makoid, president of the nonprofit World Wide Martial Arts Association (formerly the United States Martial Arts Association) in Santa Fe, New Mexico. "I'm seeing more seniors," says Makoid, who travels the country teaching martial arts.

At 71, Makoid is a lifelong martial artist and a practitioner of judo, a Japanese art that emphasizes throwing or otherwise taking one's opponent to the ground, and multiple forms of jiu jitsu, a Japanese art that focuses on grappling, or ground fighting.

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Makoid does think that some of the “harder” martial arts – such as certain forms of karate, which rely a good deal on force – may be less appropriate for seniors than arts like judo or tai chi, or aikido, which aims to redirect the opponent’s energy and uses throws, joint locks and evasions.

Cecelia Ricciotti would agree. The owner of Philadelphia Aikido at 3901 Conshohocken Ave. in Wynnefield Heights, she has taught aikido in the Philadelphia area since 1978. Ricciotti is, as far as she knows, the only female eighth-degree aikido black belt in the world.

“One of the great things about aikido is that you can practice into your old age,” says Ricciotti, 71, who has half a dozen students in their 70s and more in their 60s.

For the most part, Ricciotti’s practice remains unchanged by her advancing years – although, she says, “I certainly don’t let people throw me around anymore like I did in my 60s.”

Ricciotti reaps multiple benefits from her training. “It’s wonderful to be able to keep your balance,” she notes. “The things that start to go when you’re older are your balance and flexibility. If you can keep those things from deteriorating, your quality of life is better.” Her mantra: “Keep your body moving; keep it moving; keep it moving.”

The veteran “aikidoka” also counts among the effects of her practice “the confidence to know that wherever you go, you can handle yourself. That’s something that’s hard to measure.”

In addition, she says, the school draws people from all walks of life into a community whose members are unified by learning things and physically challenging themselves together. “There’s a community that’s very, very strong,” she says.

Ricciotti suspects many seniors may be hesitant to try martial arts. “I think older people are afraid,” she says. “It’s hard to be a beginner late in life and allow yourself to learn something new. But, boy, if you can get past that and just embrace learning, you can do almost anything.”

And she notes that aikido is a relatively safe martial art. “We have a really good safety record,” she says, adding that she has practiced for more than 40 years without injury.

No regret

Despite some suggestions that older adults should avoid “harder” martial arts, one 53-year-old shows he is more than capable of battling it out in the sparring ring.

After Charlie Schill’s brother Mike died of complications related to multiple sclerosis in 2013, Schill wasn’t sure what to do with himself. He had reached the end of a long, difficult road: Not only had he cared for Mike for seven years, but he had lost his father in 2007 and his mother in 2010. Schill, who was then 50, figured he could feel sorry for himself, or he could do something.

“I was sitting around and just wanted to change my life,” he recalls. So he signed up for classes at Daddis MMA, or Mixed Martial Arts, at 1931 Washington Ave. in South Philadelphia. “I’ve never regretted it. My life has changed in so many ways,” he says, noting that he has lost more than 50 pounds. “It’s so much fun to do, you don’t even know that you’re exercising.”

What Schill does is Muay Thai, a full-contact combat sport that originated in Thailand. One of its signature techniques is a club-like kick with the shin. “You swing your leg like a bat,” Schill explains. When sparring in Muay Thai, he says, one has to be prepared to deal with elbows, knees, kicks and punches. He has had his share of black and blue marks, but so far no serious injuries.

When Schill signed up for the initial six months at Daddis, he didn’t think he would make it to the first class. “But I kept going and going and going,” he says. Now, you might say he’s hooked. He participates in three Muay Thai classes a week, plus one boxing class and one yoga class. After an hour’s practice, he says, “I feel so much better, and energized for the whole day.”

The most challenging aspect for Schill is the cardiovascular warm-up that starts off Muay Thai sessions, which includes jumping rope, shadow boxing, stretching, and doing situps and pushups. “It’s pretty intense,” he says.

But the effort has paid off; Schill credits his martial arts practice with a mental and physical turnaround. “It just changes your whole mindset,” he says. “You say to yourself there’s nothing you can’t do or try. It just affects your whole life.”

He has become more physically active, even taking up jogging and running in some 5K races. “What I can do now and what I could do three years ago is just light years’ difference,” he says. “It’s your whole mind, your body – it’s everything. You go from ‘no’ to ‘yes.’”

Schill insists that other seniors can adopt a similar practice – if they have the right attitude. “If you’re willing to put the time in and the work, anybody can do it,” he says. Technique is what matters, he says, not strength. “Technique beats out force all the time.”

Starting a practice

For seniors considering starting a martial arts practice, Makoid of the World Wide Martial Arts Association recommends first consulting with a physician and getting the OK to exercise. Then, he says, prospective students should carefully scrutinize any school, or “dojo,” they are considering – especially with the current rash of “McDojos” that has sprung up.

“Do some work to find out the quality of instruction at the dojo and their affiliation with national organizations,” he says. For example, a legitimate judo school should be affiliated with USA Judo or one of its member organizations, such as the United States Judo Federation or the United States Judo Association. Get on the phone or on the web, he urges, and look at the school’s credentials, which may or may not be legitimate. “You just have to do a little bit of investigative work,” he says, “to find out how your teacher is qualified, and from whom.”

When a senior starts practicing, Makoid says, he or she should take it slowly to start and build up gradually. Also, he advises, “Do not do anything that injures you.” A little muscle pain, on the other hand, is to be expected when doing activities you haven’t done before.

But he believes the effort can pay off for seniors. Makoid recalls Donia, a student of his who, when her husband asked what she wanted for her 50th birthday, requested judo lessons. She studied with Makoid for 34 years and became a fourth-degree black belt before her death at 84. Then there was John, another judo student, who was still practicing at 87. “When he stood on the mat, he dropped 35 years,” Makoid says. “It was amazing to see the transformation.” Both students practiced until the time of their deaths, and as far as Makoid is concerned, they set a good example. “I don’t see why you can’t practice till you die,” he says. “That’s what I plan.”

For information on the martial arts schools mentioned here, as well as finding classes offered at area senior community centers, see the list of resources on the next page.

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How to find the activities in this issue

A wide variety of activities and classes held at senior community centers and other venues throughout the city can be found in the “Events” section of Philadelphia Corporation for Aging’s (PCA’s) website, www.pcaCares.org. To search by type of activity, location or date, click on “Events” in the top navigation bar. Choose a general category, such as Exercise or Nutrition Education, under Basic Search; or, under Advanced Search, type in a more specific term, such as Zumba, yoga, tai chi, meditation or the name of the venue. You can also search within a date range.

Dance

- Folk dancing class at Center on the Hill, 8855 Germantown Ave.: Fridays, 1 - 2:30 p.m., except for scheduled breaks: \$7 per session at the door or \$60 for 10 classes. For more information, call Bill Wadlinger at 215-233-9399, email bill@beaverfolkdance.org, or go to www.phillydance.com and look under the Friday listings.

- www.philadelphiadance.org/classes: A calendar of area dance classes.

- www.phillydance.com: A seven-day guide to folk, social and traditional dancing in and around Philadelphia, in-

cluding lessons, special events and festivals.

Martial arts

- Ba’z Tai Chi and Kung Fu Studio: Call 215-882-2804 or visit http://ba_ztai_chi.com.

- World Wide Martial Arts Association: Call 402-250-4618 or visit <http://wwmaa.org>.

- Philadelphia Aikido: Call 215-275-5727 or visit www.philadelphia-aikido.com.

- Daddis Mixed Martial Arts: Call 215-467-1008 or visit www.phillymma.com.

Meditation

- The Mindfulness Institute of the Jefferson-Myrna Brind Center of Integrative Medicine: Offers Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programs for the public and professionals, including a six-week course, “Mindfulness Tools for Daily Living for Seniors.” For more information, call 215-955-1376, email mbsr@jefferson.edu or go to www.jefferson.edu/mindfulness.

- Smiling Heart Yoga: Yoga and mindfulness meditation training for individuals and organizations by Anita Grace Brown: www.smilingheartyyoga.org.

Visit PCA at www.pcaCares.org.

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