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Tai Chi and Farming- The Making of the Tai Chi Center of Chicago

Hello Folks,

This is the annual newsletter and update, so put your glasses on and grab a glass of water. For some of you, this is your first newsletter, so welcome! Many of you newbies do not know the story of the "making of our own school" and so therefore I will begin by giving you a not-so-brief history....

I have been teaching professionally since 1992. My first teaching position was located in the Japanese Culture Center (JCC) on Belmont Ave at Sheffield. I taught at the JCC for 10 years, then moved the school to the Joel Hall Dance Center for 4 years (Yes there was a place in between, but myself and my seniors don't like to discuss that venue!) Even though we loved/were loved by the dancers, while at Joel's it became clear that the tai chi school needed its own home. Acting as a program-in-residence in these previous venues was no longer a match for the growing needs of my student base.

So without a lot of confidence, I softly began looking for a location. I was nervous about signing a lease with BIG RENT. And how could we ever find something with high ceilings, light and minimal columns? Clean and visually inspiring, serene for meditation? And of course I wanted a garden! How would we find all of this?

Then I stumbled across the building around the corner from Lisa Hish's shiatsu studio (Lisa is head of the Health portion of the Health and Philosophy Program). We saw the beauty in the raw unfinished space and with 6 inches of sandblasting debris on the floor and no walls. We led tours with flashlights so my senior students could weigh in with their opinions. Everyone loved it!

But how would I cover the rent? My dwindled 40-student base wasn't enough to commit to an annual rent in 5 digits! I needed a creative plan.

Then Lisa reminded me of how our CSA organic farm operated (that's Community Supported Agriculture). Let me take a moment to explain. Farms, like our school, are in a business that requires a lot of square footage = heavy rent \$\$\$/big mortgages. CSA farms are one of the few successful farming models left. Their success is due in part to their up-front payment structure. The subscriber pays X

dollars in the winter, the farm takes X dollars and creates a planting and harvesting plan. Come spring, each subscriber receives a weekly share of the vegetables harvested for 20-24 weeks.

If it is a good tomato year, we get lots of tomatoes in addition to the 12-15 other vegetables included that week. They ship what is ready for harvest.

This year we didn't have a lot of "something"; instead we had a little bit of "this and that." Last year we had what seemed to be a never-ending supply of cucumbers and squash and a very small amount of lettuce due to the heavy rains. A few years ago, we got so many incredible heirloom tomatoes that we had a tai chi and tomato party! These thin-skinned yellow tomatoes with magenta star centers yelled "EAT ME"!

So what is so special about the structure of a CSA? It takes away some of the financial pressure from the farmers and shares it with the collective. It allows me the subscriber to get incredible organic produce within days of its harvest. It makes me feel as if I have a relationship with my vegetables, and forces me to eat what mother nature is making verses what the store falsely provides due to chemicals or shipping halfway across the planet. If nature wants to make more cucumber and less lettuce, then this must be what is right for me to eat.

So back to the school... using the CSA model, I asked my student base if they would be willing to purchase practice time in advance. And, furthermore, if they didn't mind, could they please talk to their spouses and come back with check in hand in 14 days (!!!?) so I could commit to this magical space, with walls drawn in the sawdust, before other interested parties snatched it up?

So then the incredible happened. My student base not only maintained my teaching income by continuing to pay their monthly class dues, but also purchased enough practice time to cover an entire year's rent! Past inactive students contributed as well. Even a few non-tai chi people got wind of our school plans and contributed just to be part of it!

All of these combined efforts allowed me a year to build the various programs and fill them with students. Pretty cool eh?

As you know, art/artists (tai chi is one of them) have a hard time staying afloat. The average human doesn't quite know what to do with art other than watch it on TV. Tai chi is even harder in that it requires physical participation. Not only do you have to have an appreciation for tai chi, but you must also have the time to invest in it. It only will give back what you put into it. But like a vegetable it will make you healthy for spending that time.

So that's it...the whole story in a nutshell... but before I leave you, I want to also share with you what was accomplished during the second year and the plans for the upcoming year (Nov. 2008 - Oct. 2009)

See ya soon, E

FOUNDING MEMBERS

Lisa Hish, Elizabeth Wenscott, Paul McEntee, Bob Shibuya, Kevin Iverson, Chris Slivon, Don Tomei, Kay Christ, Estrella Hirsch, Beverly Malen, Robin Manesky, Chris Zalek, Laura Brownstone, Elizabeth Barerra, Ana Tiesman, Jody Ashenhurst, Tanya Jachimiak, Alison Orton, Janet Peden, Melissa Davis, Gina Saka, Sandy Nowarita, Mari Howards, Sanford Stark, Mary Beth Nolan, Laurie Cohen, Brian Shields, Eric Anyah, Tannia Goswami, Steven Levitt, Kipling Swehla, Jim Rudwall, Carolyn Nilges, Janet Bruce, Janet Chen, Jennifer Sheffield

What The School Accomplished During Its Second Year

It has continued to be another heck of a year! The school has grown and looks better and better each day. Below is a list of what we've accomplished:



Lexie Bruce Patio Garden (new 4 season canopy, plants, etc.)

Build-out (Arakawa Art Hanging System)

Class Development

Elizabeth Wenscott, Lisa Hish and Don Tomei - Vision Qigong

Sharon Fierro - Certified Therapeutic Qigong Instructor

Special Lectures

DePaul University - Qigong and Tai Chi as alternative health
Wenscott and Tomei

Lake Forest College - Nine Divisions of the Celestial Sphere
Wenscott, Tomei, Hish, Swehla

School Promotion

350 Breaths, a film created for www.350.org

Retro on Roscoe

ArtWalk Ravenswood

Postcards

Internet

Main Website Maintenance

www.taichicenter-chicago.com

www.yogachicago.us

www.qigongchicago.com

Other Website Development

www.myspace.com/taichicenterchicago

<http://www.youtube.com/taichicenterchicago>

<http://taichicenterchicago.blogspot.com/>

<http://yogachicago.blogspot.com/>

What is Next? What Needs to be Done? What Can You Do To Help in Year 3?

CLASS DEVELOPMENT

The Tai Chi Program, the Qigong Program, the Meditation Program, and the Yoga Program still need our support. You can help these programs by telling everyone what you know about them. You can also place our beautiful postcards anywhere you can think of (we have 5,000 of each!).

You can also make www.qigongchicago.com or www.yogachicago.us your browsers HOME PAGE so that each time you open your internet browser you accumulate a visit for our websites, which will move them closer to the top of the page in future searches.

SCHOOL SUBLET

The Tai Chi Center of Chicago has been activity looking for two more programs to join us (or sublets). If you know of anyone that is looking for space on a regular bases, send them my way.

INCREASE YOUR CLASS PARTICIPATION

Example: If you are in the Tai Chi Program, also join the Qigong Program. If you are in the Qigong Program, also join the Meditation Program etc. For just \$30.00 a month more you can increase your training by participating in two programs. For just \$50.00 a month more you can get it ALL and reach enlightenment that much quicker! Think of how many more classes will become available to you! (Initiation fee for the Meditation Program not included).

4 PREPAYMENT of ANNUAL DUES

In order to stabilize the rent I still need four people to pay their dues upfront for a year. If you are willing to do this, you will get a 5% discount. I know this is not much but it is the best I can do.

PURCHASE PRACTICE TIME

The beauty of purchasing practice time is that it allows students to practice privately in a suitable space that they would otherwise not be able to afford.

As you know practicing sword in your living room ain't that great, and practicing out in our parks is not that private; it can often end with numerous interruptions: "where did you learn that," conversation, or some punk yelling "Hiiiiii-ya!, I can kick your ass."

If you are interested in repurchasing practice time, or purchasing it for the first time, please contact me. And yes, you can share your scheduled time!

DONATIONS of TIME or MONEY

If you are able to make a financial donation, the school would gladly accept. If you are able to make a time donation, the school would gladly accept. The school is still short at covering all the rent, and we have been told that the economy will be getting worse, so let's stick together and keep alive our beautiful oasis for ourselves and for our community.

Wish List

1. **ADDITIONAL LIGHTING** It is just too dark at night making it dangerous when we are throwing swords in the air. Also, I have noticed those who get up at 6 am (ME) find it hard to stay awake at 8 pm when the lighting is soooo soft and laid back.
2. **BANNERS** The school patio is perfectly positioned within eyeshot of the newly renovated Ravenswood Billboard Factory. This incredible space will be a rental venue and will attract many new people to the building. <http://www.ravenswoodbillboardfactory.com> The plan is to create two banners one that will run horizontally along the patio fence visible to the Billboard Factory and the other will run vertically so that can be seen from Ravenswood Avenue.
3. **MAGAZINES** I can't tell you how many times a visitor to the school has said "Oh my gosh, this school is gorgeous and should be in a magazine!" Ok, I agree, who can help make this happen?

Thank You's 2008

I would like to thank the following students and friends for their generous help and timeliness:

Janet Bruce for donating the 4 season awning for the Lexie Bruce Garden Patio.

Lisa Hish, for donating time towards the Lexie Bruce Garden Patio.

Evie Evil, Steven Leavitt, Kipling Swehla, Christine Wallers and Rob Wittig for fulfilling my dream of seeing their artwork on my walls and in my ears!

Christine Wallers, for donating her time and expertise in installing the Arakawa Art Hanging System, and installing all the art shown at the ArtWalk Ravenswood event.

Nathan Schowenthal, for donating his time and expertise in installing the Arakawa Art Hanging System.

Paul McEntee, CPA for donating his accounting expertise and structured our financial plan.

Sas Stark, Robin Manesky and Chris Zalek, donated time towards preparing the newbies for this year's demonstration.

I would also like to thank all those who purchased practice space OR made a donation to the school in 2007.

Finally a thanks to all the Founding Members, for without you I wouldn't have a reason to thank any of the people above! So thank you!

Final Notes

ART AND TAI CHI This year has reminded me that the school can be many things to many people. It can be a place to learn time-honored skills such as Tai Chi, Qigong, Meditation or Yoga. It can be a place to meet like-minded people. It can be a place of solace during very challenging times. And it can even be a place that will promote your own personal skills and abilities. This year I had the opportunity to promote a sampling of the artistic abilities within my circle of fellow practitioners of Tai Chi or the Tao. Yes, I know that sounds corny but let me take a brief moment to explain. If Tai Chi is an art form designed to harmonize all that is human between heaven and earth or the Tao, then so can the painter or the musician. What I loved about this year's ArtWalk Ravenswood was that all the artwork on display was created by dedicated artists of the Tao. Artists that not only challenge or inspire the human realm, but artists who are dedicated to connecting to all that is below or above. Beautiful indeed!

TAI CHI'ISTS OF THE FUTURE



Grace Ann Iverson
1/29/08



Maya Antonella Canales
10/?/08