Water workout

Ai chi classes help participants regain flexibility, strength and balance

As a volunteer she started classes at Raymond Skinner Center, 712 Tanglewood in Midtown, and teaches at Church Health Center Wellness, 1115 Union, where she originally learned the water therapy from another volunteer. Now a certified ai chi instructor, Martin also has taught at retirement communities such as The Village at Germantown and The Glenmary.

"I really thank Miss Eliza for choosing the Skinner Center to do this class," says lifeguard Alfreda Coleman, 50, "It's such a benefit for 'seasoned' adults.

"The class is very relaxing and beneficial, especially for the older population. Within 10 to 15 minutes of the class, I can see the stress levels go down from those who are more stressed and I'll just get in the water with the class. The movement and the soothing music help the whole body. And at Skinner Center, you can get in free.

Martin says of ai chi, "This is an exercise you either don't like or you love. I love it. In teaching, I am receiving the greatest gift: seeing people feel better, get better. It just makes me happy."

Happiness was not her initial impetus to ai chi.

"I was finding it more difficult to walk. I could hardly do my job," said Martin, 64. "My doctor had told me I would be benefited by a water exercise class."

"The movement and the soothing music help the whole body," said lifeguard Alfreda Coleman, 50, who participates in the classes at the Raymond Skinner Center.

"This exercise is about achieving balance: balance of body, mind and spirit," said Sandy Harris, who teaches ai chi classes at the Raymond Skinner Center.

By Anita Houk / Special to My Life

"Ai CHI has been a lifesaver for me," Eliza Martin said, "and I just want to share it."

So on her own time and for free, she spreads the word and teaches the techniques of the progressive water exercises that can improve strength, balance and flexibility.
Eliza Martin (right) leads an ai chi class at the Raymond Skinner Center. “This is an exercise you either don’t like or you love. I love it. In teaching, I am receiving the greatest gift: seeing people feel better, in a wheelchair if I didn’t start exercising. When you have osteoarthritis and fibromyalgia, exercise is the last thing you want to do.”

Martin quickly took to the aquatic therapy developed in the early 1990s by fitness expert Jun Konno of Japan. She found practicing ai chi “very nurturing. Gradually your energy builds ... and the stress melts away.”

Life’s stresses, she says, sparked her own illnesses.

“Stresses contribute to the fibromyalgia and weaken the immune system,” she said, “but ai chi strengthens the immune system. The deep breathing that goes with this exercise is so beneficial. Gentle movements are coordinated with the deep breathing.

“There’s a relaxation that’s empowering.”

Cindy Riley, one of Martin’s ai chi students at Skinner Center, understands. “With ai chi, you do a lot of stretching without realizing it, and that’s good for me. I love the water, and I can feel so weightless in the water.”

She gets around with the aid of a wheeled walker, but that was not always the case. In 2001, she was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis. She took disability retirement in 2006 and battled ovarian cancer. Now 61, Riley is dealing with the recent discovery of a cancerous spot on a lung.

“With this ai chi, it’s also good getting around other people, becoming part of a new group of friends. But of course, Sandy is my lifesaver.”

Sandy Harris, is Riley’s friend and her ai chi teacher on Thursdays at Skinner Center. Harris is pleased to be an Eliza Martin protégé.

“I started taking the class from Eliza, and she asked if I’d like to teach,” said Harris, 69. “I am not certified, but we all muddle through together on Thursdays.

“I came to the class once and was instantly hooked,” said Harris, a retired educational psychology instructor at University of Memphis and Christian Brothers University. “There is a dynamic involved, both from the exercise and from the group.

“This exercise is about achieving balance: balance of body, mind and spirit.”