



Grace Liu, of Tavares, leads participants during the World Tai Chi and Qigong Day celebration event on Saturday at Lake Sumter Landing Market Square.

Rachel Govola, Daily Sun



Jennie Dea, of the Village of Country Club Hills, participates in the World Tai Chi and Qigong Day celebration.



Kelly Murray, of the Village of Collier, participates in the event on Saturday.

ONLY IN THE VILLAGES *By James Dinan*

The fourth Saturday in April is World Tai Chi and Qigong Day and local tai chi practitioners gathered in Lake Sumter Landing Market Square on Saturday morning for two hours of demonstrations and presentations on the martial art and exercise, turning the square into a gathering place to have fun and learn something new.

TAI CHI

"Get up everybody, let's go," said Sandy Laing, of the Village of Rio Ranchero, as she prepared to open the day with a qigong warmup. "This is for everyone so let's get to it."

A few minutes after her call, hundreds of people were standing in the square, ready to do qigong basics. Qigong is a combination of slow-flowing movement, meditation, body posture and breathing. It is practiced in The Villages and elsewhere to promote exercise, healing and recreation.

"It's an easy warmup," Laing said. "It's an opportunity for people to practice with those all over the world." Many of those who participated in the qigong demonstration stuck around for a session on tai chi for arthritis.

"It's a modified version of tai chi that the Arthritis Foundation credits for easing arthritic pain for its practitioners," said Annie Ting, a Village of Bonita resident and tai chi practitioner and teacher. "We have seen people dealing with arthritis using tai chi as an ideal form of exercise to keep them active in The Villages."

Tai chi is, by definition, a Chinese martial art that was first developed for combat and self-defense. For most practitioners, it has become a form of exercise, an in-motion meditation of gentle, deliberate flowing motions.

"I want to grow old without feeling old," said Bob Martin, a Village of Osceola Hills resident who teaches qigong and tai chi in The Villages and is the founder and chief instructor of Unified Force Martial Arts. "Tai chi helps with your blood pressure and immunity and qigong boosts your immunity. We do this for our health and for self-defense."

Grace Liu is a Tavares resident who comes to The Villages every week to teach classes on tai chi lakeside at Lake Sumter. She has also been a longtime judge for the International Chinese Martial Arts Championships, which takes place every summer in Orlando.

"Most of us are self-taught but Grace Liu is a professional tai chi teacher, a 21st generation instructor," Laing said. "Her form is perfect and her students are well-trained."

"The Villages community loves tai chi and we have a great family here," Liu added, with the help of a translator. Among Liu's students is Rebecca Vargas, a Village of Sabal Chase resident who won two gold medals at the 2024 International Chinese Martial Arts Championships in Orlando. She won in both Tai Chi 32 Straight Sword and Tai Chi 42 Hand Form.

"Tai chi gives you a lot of peace," Vargas noted. "When we age, our balance goes away, so tai chi helps us keep that balance. You don't need experience with tai chi. All you need to do is show up and learn."

As the day went on the number of participants dropped as the beginners took to their seats to watch the practitioners and their students in action, showing off their ability with swords, fans and their hands. But the enthusiasm remained high throughout the program.

"We hope our guests were entertained and educated by what they saw," Laing said. "If they liked what they saw, we encourage them to take in a tai chi or qigong class."

Currently, there are over 20 tai chi and qigong classes available every week in The Villages. The exercise is also offered through The Enrichment Academy.

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BOB MARTIN Village of Hills resident and qigong and tai chi instructor