

A DECADE IN THE PARK: *T'AI CHI IN THE PARK* CELEBRATES 10 YEARS! By Laoshi Laurince McElroy

It has long been my dream that one day Americans of all ages, creeds and colors will be practicing Tai-Chi Chuan in the beautiful parks of this country, as they do in China. Few places in the world have lovely open spaces which can and should be used productively, and at no expense. The result would be tremendous improvement in mental and physical well-being.

These are the words written by Jou Tsung Hwa as the “Author’s Dream” on the first few pages of his book *The Tao of Tai-Chi Chuan: Way to Rejuvenation*. They were the primary inspiration for my decision to begin *T’ai Chi in the Park* in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1997. Even as I write those words, it seems impossible to me that the event has been around for 10 years. I had no idea in the spring of 1997 that I would be starting something that would last as long and have a history rooted in two states.



Many people join us for another opportunity to practice and to meet with people of similar minds.

I wish I could tell you that my inspiration was purely altruistic, but it was not. Since I found myself no longer with a primary instructor, I thought a public event inviting other instructors and players to meet, practice, and share would offer me an opportunity to continue to hone my skills in a way that solo training would not. As we have discovered at Shorefront Park, this thought has never really come to fruition. Most people who attend the event are looking for lessons, answers to questions, etc. That isn’t to say that we haven’t had any success in bringing instructors and long-time players with divergent points-of-view together. Because of *T’ai Chi in the Park*, I have met and played with Dr. Robert Swarts, Sifu Donald Walth, Cheryl Lindholm, Mike Blue, and the students of Sifu Jose Mendoza in Des Moines; and Elan Abneri, Sifu Gregg Zilb, the students of Stephen Lee, members of the United Studios of Self-Defense, Judith Budd-Walsh, and many other students of the arts from various programs throughout Suffolk County.

The initial Iowa gatherings were in Drake Park, a beautiful but small neighborhood park near Drake University north of downtown Des Moines. It is in a historic district and a neighborhood in transition from dilapidated and dangerous to pristine and safe. Full of what I call “old grove trees,” the park was also within three blocks of my residence. Sponsored by Water Tiger School, Des Moines Parks & Recreation, and the Drake Neighborhood Association, *T’ai Chi in the Park* was on the third Saturday every month through the summer and each morning was a mixture of demonstration and discussions. For the first hour, we played. For the second hour there was a set topic, e.g., *How to Find an Instructor, Health Benefits of T’ai Chi & Qigong, T’ai Chi and Taoism, T’ai Chi as a Martial Art*, etc.

The logistics of marketing the event every month during the summer was a nightmare, so after the first few years, I decided to run the gatherings for a few weekends at the beginning of summer and a few weekends at the end of summer. Since most participants came for the experience of T’ai Chi, we also ended the discussion portion of the event. And it has followed that model ever since.

When I moved to Patchogue in the summer of 2000, the event continued in my absence in Des Moines. Although the second session of 2000 was the last “formal” *T’ai Chi in the Park* in Des Moines, it has led to other public T’ai Chi gatherings in Iowa’s capital city. One group continues to meet in a local shopping mall early on Saturday mornings before the stores open for business. Although I was saddened by the end

of the Iowa event, I am glad for both the influence it seems to have had and for the new opportunities presented on Long Island.

My wife and I closed on our new Bailey Avenue residence in the village on September 15, 2000, and my first contact with Patchogue Parks & Recreation followed just a few weeks later. Our first gathering in Shorefront Park was on May 5, 2001. That means this year marks the seventh for the event in the village.

Some of our attendees get their only T'ai Chi fix on the grass — or dirt, or mud — near the band shell of Shorefront Park. Others come to see what T'ai Chi actually is and if it holds anything for them. Many, from the studio and from our public classes, come for another opportunity to practice and to meet with people of similar minds.

We've even increased the roster of Water Tiger from the event. A handful of students, past and current, have come to us through the event. A student since June 2003, Pat Mizzi tells me, "I have rarely been to *Tai Chi in the Park*, but if it hadn't existed I probably would not have found Water Tiger Tai Chi at all." A friend brought her a flyer because he thought she might be interested. She was.

Si-Goo Mui Francesca DeStefano looks at the event as a "beautiful way to bookend" her summer. She tells me that it is high up on her list of favorite warmer-weather activities. Her favorite part of the morning is an echo of my own. She says, "I enjoy watching various individuals and groups play different forms as much as I enjoy the conversations." Francesca tends to be the event's "official" photographer. She insists that "capturing the fun from behind the camera lens is an integral part of *T'ai Chi in the Park* for me."

I remember not only how great being amongst the trees of Drake Park felt, but also the fantastic view of downtown Des Moines and the dome of the state capital in the distance. Though I miss the trees, I cannot complain about the feeling of being next to the water, nor about the phenomenal view of the Patchogue and Great South Bays and across to Fire Island. Water Tiger School student Mary Walsh, initially part of Si-Suk Paul Adago's public class for Patchogue-Medford Continuing Education in the spring of 2006, shares the connection with nature she feels at Shorefront. "It's a softer side — a slower side — to the world, to society," she says. "A great place to observe and learn and be a part of nature."

Without knowing the words that led to the creation of the event, she also tells me, "Parks are a great place for Tai Chi play."

