

## STUDENT PROFILE: BARBARA RICHARDSON

By WTS Staff

Originally Published June 2014

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Barbara Richardson first stepped into the studio at 29 South Ocean on a Friday afternoon last October. Class was over and she came in the door as Michael Kandel was leaving. She told McElroy Laoshi that she'd visited the website and was looking for more information. "I can't tell you how many times I hear the words 'I need to look at my schedule and I'll be in touch'," says Laoshi. "I'm glad Barbara presents an example of someone actually doing just as she said she would."

Barbara returned to the studio while Laoshi was in New Orleans and was introduced to the mat and her first class on Sunday, November 3<sup>rd</sup>, with Michael at the front. His impression of his time with her was overwhelmingly positive, "It seems to me she has a very good attitude toward what we do; in other words, she's not in a hurry."

It wasn't her first T'ai Chi experience and the journey that brought her to Water Tiger has been a long one. She tells us that it actually began when she was in high school: "I began to have the feeling that there was 'something different' out there, but I couldn't put a name to it." The next step on her journey appeared when she began to work in health care and observed how a patient's attitude affected treatment outcomes. She explored this mind / body connection by attending yoga classes and even attending an ashram to explore what immersion in a yoga lifestyle would be like. There were also some Qigong workshops on this leg of her journey. Unfortunately, these experiences did not connect with her.

A connection finally came through a friend in the mid-90s. Her friend introduced her to Healing Touch, which Barbara describes as an energy-based therapeutic approach to healing on physical, mental and spiritual levels. It was Healing Touch that put a name to the "something different" that had remained nameless since high school. She says, "I became aware of the meta-physical level and the importance of maintaining harmony and balance in the energy field." She continues to practice Healing Touch today and missed our rain date *World T'ai Chi & Qigong Day* event to attend a weekend retreat. But, her practice is more than an occasional retreat. "A friend and I periodically exchange energy treatments at which time I feel centered and focused." She also follows a self-treatment regimen. However, she admits that she actually found years ago that her exchanges with her friend and her solo work were just not enough.

Barbara reports that it was treatment for a serious illness in 2006 that led to the opening of the door to what she believes will fill the gap, T'ai Chi. She was utilizing both Western and Eastern medical techniques for her illness. It was her Chinese doctor and acupuncturist that gave her a series of breathing and movement exercises she found helpful. The same doctor arranged for her to attend a T'ai Chi class in a park setting and speak with the instructor. She reveals, "It was after this conversation that I felt T'ai Chi was the path to follow to regain the balance and focus that was missing from my life."

She began looking for a regular class, but was disappointed to find only what she describes as "exercise classes". Once again, there was not a fit.



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Luck would have it that there was a move to Patchogue and a fresh search online for local classes. Water Tiger was in the results. She liked what she saw online —that the classes are small and the emphasis is on individual pace. She reports that her subsequent visit in October “felt right” and that it still feels right after seven months.

Barbara’s time at Water Tiger has not been without challenge. The first was the mat. As we all know, the mat could probably make one of The Flying Wallendas stumble. Her relationship with the mat has evolved, though. She explains, “I now see the mat as an ally.” It lets her know when her attention is wandering and reminds her to focus on breathing and rooting. Another challenge arises from irregular practice due to an irregular work schedule. Though, this challenge does reveal another example of her good attitude. She approaches it from the perspective — introduced to her by her first instructor in the park — “even a little is beneficial.” Her current goal is to practice a little each day and to maintain regular attendance to stay on track.

Since November, Barbara has made her way through Water Tiger’s family of *Rails* exercises and has been playing through the intricacies of the *T’ai Chi Walk* and what Laoshi calls our swimmers’ turn. “My expectation to be able to advance at my own pace has been realized,” she happily reports. “I’ve felt no pressure to complete a step within a timeframe or to catch up to other students.”

Something she didn’t expect is how her interactions with her fellow students have unfolded at Water Tiger. She explains, “I was surprised to find such a cohesive group — more than just a class. My fellow students have been helpful in a non-critical, supporting way and I have felt accepted into the group.” She adds that these interactions deepen at the end of every month with our *Push Hands* exercises.

Through her experience on the mat, Barbara has — in a way — returned to where her journey started. In her words, “I have become aware that there is more to T’ai Chi than I expected. While I am not sure exactly what that means, I have a lifetime to explore it.”

What has brought her to this embracing of whatever her journey might bring? It was that serious illness in 2006. She shares that she realized too much of her focus was on what was truly insignificant. She describes her evolution: “I became more aware of the people and things that are important to me — and one of those things is my own well being.” One step at a time, Barbara, with all of us by your side.



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