

STUDENT PROFILE: JOEL VALERIO

By WTS Staff

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Joel Valerio found Water Tiger School in January 2005. Although many come in the door because of the sign in the window or from an internet search, Joel actually let his fingers do the walking and used the Yellow Pages. "Most of the inquiries I receive from our Yellow Pages ad are people looking for a kid's martial arts program," says Laoshi. "I'm always glad when it connects with its intended audience."

What had made Joel just such an audience was what he saw as the non-aggressiveness of the art. "From what I have seen of other martial arts," he says, "there were a lot of punching and kicking drills." He tells us that he was attracted by the constant movement and gentle flow of the T'ai Chi forms. It was also the right time for him to find a class. "I felt like I needed a change in my life. I was in a rut and thought that some exercise might help."

He was not without experience in the art before he walked into the studio for the first time. But, he explains, his previous experience while he was in college was much, much different. "The instructor would show us a move and after we tried the move, we would stop and he would come around and adjust us."

Joel recalls that this was the breakdown of every class, from beginning to end. He appreciates the introduction he received in college, but he was delighted to discover an entirely different world on our mat. "I was being taught how to walk, breathe, and move again," he recalls. He also remembers his surprise at T'ai Chi's depth as an internal art and as a martial art. Joel had always thought of T'ai Chi as more of a relaxation and meditative art. His final surprise was his discovery of "such a warm and welcoming group of people."

That feeling carries into Joel's favorite aspect of time in the studio. "I enjoy working and playing with others on the mat," he tells us with a smile. "And not only the interaction of Push Hands week, but also just the everyday moments that we have together." He explains that he appreciates the time before and after classes when everyone is just sitting and talking about their days. Joel also finds value in his daily practice at home "because it is time to let the day go." He adds, "It gives me a chance to really pick apart or play with other aspects of a movement." His method of practice includes taking time for basic form details, as well as exploration of the martial side of the art. He does feel there is one drawback to practice at home, though. He says, "I really don't have anyone to bounce an idea off of like in class."



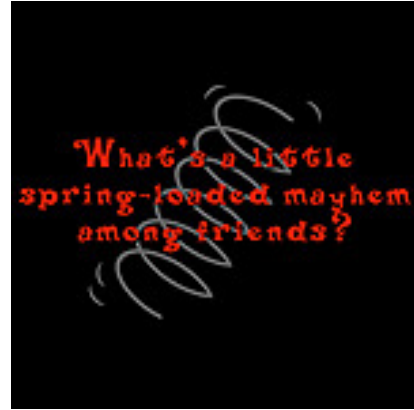
**Joel Valerio (L)
exploring T'ai Chi's
depth as a martial art.**

And “bounce” is a good word when one thinks of Joel. “He always brings a sense of joy and exuberance into the studio with him,” observes Laoshi. “And it tends to be infectious.” Laoshi will often say in reference to Joel, “Sometimes you just have to bounce.” If you’ve been on the mat with Joel over the last few months, you may have noticed a particular t-shirt recently added to his class wardrobe. It reads, “What’s a little spring-loaded mayhem among friends?” As his interest in the art was originally rooted in its gentleness, we are surprised that his spring-loaded sense of mayhem even extends into the Sunday evening T’ai Chi as a Martial Art class. According to Joel, “The martial class really opened the door to my understanding so much about the art as a whole.”

His deeper understanding of T’ai Chi has carried itself into his everyday life. Joel shares that the art has affected the way he stands, the way he thinks, the control he has over his emotions, and even how he works his way through the various situations in which he finds himself on a daily basis. He extends this influence to inspiring his escape from a job that was stagnant and negatively impacting his life. Since the switch over a year ago, he has found himself enjoying challenge, learning, and growth on both professional and personal levels.

But his journey with T’ai Chi is not without a different set of challenges. He admits that the most pervasive is that he tends to want to rush things. “When I first learn a form I want to achieve perfection,” he says. “I am slowly learning that if it feels right then it is probably correct.” According to him, he can sometimes be overly critical of himself. He finds that this self-criticism can spark a spiral into what he describes as “a monkey-mind state.” When this happens, Joel takes a breath and asks his body and mind to relax. He acknowledges that sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t.

What he finds that always seems to work for him is the pursuit of his main goal for his time at Water Tiger: to enjoy his time on the mat. He does have other goals: to learn the staff and straight sword forms. With the success he has with his main goal, and the influence his goal has on his fellow students, we have no doubt the others will also come to fruition.



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