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Tai chi court to memorialize instructor at Cabin John park

Planning Board to meet on proposal this week

by Erin Donaghue | Staff Writer

Saturday morning, a group of devoted tai chi practitioners gathered in Cabin John Regional Park to practice the ancient martial art form, and to search for balance in their lives.

The lush greenery of the park provided a serene background for the group, some of whom have been gathering there weekly since 1997, as they moved seamlessly between graceful poses.

“It’s kind of like our Saturday morning home,” said group member Randy Atkins, 53, of Germantown. Atkins and others who practiced on Saturday belong to the Wuwei Tai Chi Club, a county tai chi group. Tai chi, they say, is as much about finding a much-needed respite from hectic everyday life as it is about developing better posture, promoting flexibility and encouraging circulation.



Brian Lewis/The Gazette

(From left) Jan Erlich-Moss, 59, Randy Atkins, 53, and Howard Moss, 59, practice tai chi at Cabin John Regional Park on Saturday morning. A group of devoted tai chi practitioners have been gathering weekly there since 1997.

The practice, based in part on the Taoist philosophy, can be practiced alone or with a partner — both as away to promote health and well-being and as a form of self defense. Practitioners study how to neutralize external force from an opponent without responding with an equal force.

“It’s not highly aerobic, but the more you do it the more you feel powerful, controlled and together,” Atkins said. “You feel your body is more at your command and more relaxed.”

For many of the practitioners at the park, however, the Saturday morning practices are bittersweet — the group, they say, is missing an integral member. The practices were launched 12 years ago by Rockville resident and tai chi instructor David Chen, a graphic designer and artist who taught tai chi at many locations throughout the county and founded the Wuwei Tai Chi Club.

When Chen died suddenly of brain cancer on Christmas Day 2005, the group — spearheaded by his wife Joanne Chang — continued with the practice of the martial art that was an integral part of Chen’s life. About 30 people gather weekly, encompassing not just members of the Wuwei club but of more than 50 tai chi groups in the area — a testament to Chen’s willingness to share his love of the ancient martial art form with the community, friends and family say.

“We think of David as the embodiment of tai chi,” Atkins said of Chen, who was 50 when he passed away.” He had this infectious charisma about him when he talked about it.”

The group hopes to honor Chen’s memory in a more symbolic way, however. The group plans to create a tai chi court — a stone, circular space, 40 feet in diameter, nestled within the natural surroundings to provide a peaceful place for the community to gather and practice tai chi, exercise or meditate.

“It’s a place for gathering and contemplating,” said Bethesda resident Hsien-Yuan Chen, 48, a member of the Wuwei group and an architect who is designing the court. The court will not be raised like a stage, he said, and the goal is to have it blend in with the natural surroundings. Benches, small trees and plants will be planted around the edges of the court, which is planned for a small natural clearing near the Cabin John Miniature Train station. “When the plants and trees grow in, hopefully you’ll just happen upon it.”

For many, the park is a fitting place for the memorial, because it instantly brings to mind Chen’s weekly teachings. “David taught in many places, but he always came back here because it is so beautiful,” said Joanne Chang, Chen’s wife and president of the group.

The court is envisioned in the shape of a yin and yang, made of black and white flagstone with a concrete slab base, to represent the Chinese philosophy of the interdependence of opposing forces in nature. Planning staff is recommending approval of the project, which will be a public/private partnership between Park and Planning and the Wuwei Tai Chi Club, at a Planning Board hearing this week.

The Wuwei Tai Chi Club is planning on launching a fund-raising campaign for the \$70,000 project after the partnership is finalized, Chang said. The group is currently bidding out the project and accepting donations to help cover the cost.

The group hopes that the court will help spread the word about tai chi in the community. “It’s about understanding yourself, and understanding others,” Chang said. “In the end, it’s about understanding the whole world.”

To make a tax-deductible donation to the David Chen Memorial Tai Chi Court, visit the Wuwei Tai Chi Club’s Web site at www.wuweitaichi.com/founder.htm and click on the link for the Tai Chi Court Donation Form. For more information about donating, e-mail donation@wuweitaichi.com.