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Tai chi court in Cabin John dedicated to late instructor from Rockville scheduled to open in spring

Members of the Wu Wei Tai Chi Club collecting money for engraving court

by Cody Calamaio | Staff Writer



Brian Lewis/The Gazette

Joanne Chang, 43, of Rockville (from left) leads Hui-Min Huang, 57, of North Potomac; Julian Chu, 64, of Great Falls Va.; and Kee Yu, 47, of Silver Spring in tai chi on Saturday. The Wu Wei Tai Chi Club expects in the spring to open its Tai Chi Court in honor of Chang's husband, former instructor David Chen of Rockville.

- **Tai chi court to memorialize instructor at Cabin John park**

Every Saturday morning of winter, David Chen would carry a snow shovel with him to Cabin John Regional Park.

His wife, Joanne Chang, would laugh at him as he meticulously shoveled snow off the muddy ground where members of the Wu Wei Tai Chi Club would soon gather.

"Why not have a student do it for you?" she would ask. "You do it because you can," he would reply.

Years after Chen, 50, died of a brain tumor in 2005, his widow looks back on that memory fondly, recalling his selfless devotion to his art, and to his students.

In the spot that Chen always shoveled clear of snow, his students and friends are now in the final stages of creating a flagstone tai chi court to continue to hold the free outdoor practices he started in 1997.

"I think his life is a very beautiful example to us and I think that's why he inspired so many," said Chang, 43, of Rockville. Chen and Chang met in Taiwan in 1993 and married in the United States in 1999.

Approved by the Montgomery County planning board in 2009, the 48-foot-diameter circular flagstone tai chi court will be in the shape of a yin and yang, said project manager Ellen Masciocchi. A path will connect the court to an existing sidewalk.

The project is the first tai chi court in the county, and one of the few in the United States, Masciocchi said.

Because Chen was a well-loved and uniting leader in the tai chi community, the Wu Wei Tai Chi Club was flooded with donations after his death, said club member Charles Votaw, 50, of Kensington. By using the money to create a permanent tai chi court, the club hopes to continue the efforts that Chen started by welcoming new people to the sport with the free Saturday practices.

"Tai chi is supposed to be something that helps people with their health and we're happy to help people for free if they are interested," said Votaw, who has been practicing tai chi for 18 years.

In addition to the money raised from the community, the club has secured a matching grant from the state for up to \$40,000, Votaw said. Construction on the \$80,000 court was supposed to break ground several months ago, but because of the rules associated with the grant, the club cannot use a county contractor like they anticipated, and are seeking bids from private contractors.

Though the group has secured enough funding to begin construction this spring, they need to raise about \$7,000 for engraving details to finish the project.

"We just want it to be something that will impress people and they'll feel comfortable being there," Votaw said.

Those who have never practiced tai chi can see Chen's other work.

Chen, who moved to the United States from Taiwan in 1979, was a digital artist and designed the exterior of Montgomery County's Ride On buses, Chang said. He also helped design the map of Washington, D.C.'s Metro system.

"That is his work that you can see all the time," Chang said.

The overwhelming support from the community after the loss of her husband has been cathartic for Chang. As the tai chi court moves closer to becoming a reality, she looks forward to the creation of a place where she can feel close with him.

"I think it saved me, too, it saved my life," Chang said. "Without tai chi, without David, I don't know how I'd continue."

TO DONATE

To donate to the Wu Wei Tai Chi Club, send checks payable to:

-David Chen Memorial Fund, P.O. Box 3584, Gaithersburg, MD 20885-3584.

Donations are tax deductible and will receive a tax receipt by mail.

For details, call 301-251-2345.

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