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Senior-modified tai chi a first for Edmond retirees

Special by Jim Stafford

EDMOND, Okla. — “Are you ready to grasp the peacock’s tail?” Martha Gilliland asked as she looked out over an audience of about a dozen residents of Edmond’s Touchmark at Coffee Creek retirement community.

Gilliland leads an exercise program at Touchmark for older adults called “Tai Ji Quan: Moving for Better Balance.” Class members responded in unison by positioning their bodies to follow her instructions. Grasping the peacock’s tail is one of the precise movements of the Tai Ji Quan exercise routine.

“Hold that with our hands,” Gilliland continued, demonstrating the moves as she spoke. “The right arm makes a circle now, when your hands come together at the wrist, like you have a butterfly or bird, turn it to your left, raise it up and let it go.”

Tai Ji Quan is a modified form of the Chinese Martial Arts discipline tai chi. The tai chi movements provide agility and mobility while offering a relaxation experience, according to a study reported this year in the *Journal of American Geriatrics Society*.

Fuzhong Li, Ph.D., a senior scientist at the Oregon Research Institute, developed Tai Ji Quan specifically for older adults. Dr. Li reduced the number of movements from traditional tai chi from 24 to eight.

“He modified it just for strength and conditioning of older adults,” said Gilliland, who trained under Dr. Li. “The program was developed for people who are 60 years and older.”

Oklahoma health officials adopted Tai Ji Quan to improve balance of older Oklahomans and prevent harmful falls that injure many people. It is the first in the Edmond area to be offered at a retirement community.

Gilliland discovered Tai Ji Quan at her church, St. John the Baptist Catholic Church in Edmond, where she enrolled in a 12-week class started by the parish nurse.

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“I just loved it,” she said. “I thought this would be a great way to help out my parish community if I learned the program so I could be one of the instructors.”

“My mother is a resident [at Touchmark] and has been for about five years.” Gilliland said, “Yes, I would love to come out there and do the class” when asked to teach it at Touchmark.

Touchmark’s initial class has been under way since November, with twice weekly attendance as high as 35.

Touchmark resident Adrienne Parker was among those enthusiastically working to “grasp the peacock” at a mid-week session in early December. Parker was motivated to join the class after tripping over a garden hose and falling while planting flowers in her garden.

“I enrolled in the Touchmark class and immediately felt that my body moved more easily and gracefully,” Parker said. “The instructor is excellent and very encouraging. It has improved my balance tremendously.”

While some class members complete the Tai Ji routines from standing positions, others remained seated as they followed along.

All of them are gaining strength and confidence, Gilliland said.

“It stretches the muscles and really conditions all parts of your body,” she said. “We exercise from our heads to our toes. You use every muscle.”

A full-service retirement community, Touchmark at Coffee Creek offers a wide range of homes and lifestyle options and is located just off Covell. Touchmark is part of the Coffee Creek 638-acre planned residential development, which includes a golf course, recreational centers and walking and biking trails for Coffee Creek homeowners. For more information, visit TouchmarkEdmond.com.