

Tai Chi Master Teaches Craft in White Plains

By Sam Barron

One of America's top tai chi masters is plying his craft right here in White Plains.

Gene Nelson, who has been doing tai chi for more than 25 years, recently received the highest ranking from the American Tai Chi and Qigong Association. An advisory board member and certified tai chi instructor with the association, Nelson regularly teaches classes at Burke Rehabilitation Center.

Only 100 people in the country have achieved the highest ranking with the American Tai Chi and Qigong Association.

"If you do tai chi, you will feel better," Nelson said. "It is an esoteric art form, people love it. People who have ailments like Parkinson's have benefited from taking tai chi."

Nelson, a Yonkers resident who runs Empire Tai Chi, said he gets many phone calls from people who want to learn tai chi for arthritis, stress management or maybe to learn it for self-defence.

"Studies have been done on its effectiveness," Nelson said. "Now insurance companies send you there, some offer you discounts if you take tai chi."

Nelson started working with Burke 16 years ago, doing a free 10-week program. Now he offers 11 different classes serving 130 students. Classes are diverse and



Gene Nelson teaches tai chi at Burke Rehabilitation Center in White Plains.

offered at various times of the day, and for all walks of life.

"If we had unlimited space, all you'd have to do is let people know what we're doing," Nelson said. "Tai chi has a credibility factor, people feel credible doing it. It's kind of like how yoga has become."

Nelson said that when he first started out, if you googled tai chi, around 100 sites would pop up. Now there are hundreds of thousands of websites devoted to tai chi. There are sites that tell you how tai chi helps fibromyalgia or how tai chi helps

you maintain balance.

"Whatever you have, it's there," Nelson said. "It's becoming mainstream."

When he first started teaching classes at a local recreation center, Nelson said many people took the class because they were curious. Today, very few people take classes because they are curious. Most people look to tai chi to help improve their lives, he explains.

Nelson got involved with tai chi after fighting off a mugger outside of Yankee Stadium. A boxer since he was 13, Nelson's job as a marketing consultant meant he had to travel to some not great areas and wanted to learn how to better defend himself. Classes in karate and tae kwan do didn't work.

"I wasn't happy," Nelson said. "I didn't like the feel of the classes. They were great if you wanted to learn how to punch and kick, but when I stumbled onto tai chi, I said 'wow'. I was so committed to it, I was taking 14 classes a week. It became a part of my life."

After leaving his business job, Nelson's wife thought he was going to retire, but he plunged headfirst into turning his love of tai chi into a business.

"It's really taken off," Nelson said. "If you find something that you love to do you will never work a day in your life."

Much of tai chi focuses on body

alignment and body awareness, and learning about how to control and calm yourself, avoiding meeting force with force. Nelson said that studies in the New England Journal of Medicine have shown the benefits of doing tai chi to various parts of the body.

In order to reach the highest ranking, Nelson had to go through a set of criteria, including letters of recommendation, documentation of 2,000 hours of training, and proof that he had high proficiency in different aspects of the material arts. He also had to show that he had trained people who eventually became teachers.

"We want to reach out to as many people as we possibly can," Nelson said.

Helping more people learn about tai chi is one of Nelson's goals. He is developing a teacher training center to allow people to learn how to teach tai chi.

"It's all about having the right teacher," Nelson said. "I teach classes for people who can't even stand, and we do everything from the waist up. As long as you have been cleared by a doctor to do exercise, you can find a program specific to your needs. The art of teaching tai chi is as great as tai chi itself. Tai chi is meant to be fluid."

For more information about Nelson and his tai chi classes visit empiretaichi.com.