

Connections *at Incarnate Word Retirement Community*

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Participants from the St. Philip of Jesus Senior Center get a workout from movement meditation exercise. They recently took part in a blood pressure research program and preliminary results show 80 percent had lowered their blood pressure.

Connections Reaches Out

**By Mary Martha McNeel
Connections Outreach Instructor**

In February, Connections Coordinator Debbie Gonzales approached me about developing wellness groups as part of the Connections community outreach program.

We quickly began our first group at St. Philip of Jesus Catholic Church. Within a month of beginning the group, I entered the group into a nationwide outcomes research project. The outcomes project focused on the effects of Tai Chi/Chi Gong on perceived levels of stress. Jean Deliganis, the St. Philip clinic nurse, measured blood pressure and pulse at the beginning of the eight-week study and then again at the end.

The national study results will be sent to us soon, but preliminary findings indicate a significant reduction in blood pressures for 80 percent of our group. The next study will be about the effects of practicing Chi Gong/Tai Chi on blood sugar levels.

We then began another wellness group at St. Bonaventure Catholic Church in collaboration with the local branch library, Cortez. The managing librarian of the branch, Darcy Griffith, has been a dynamic partner in activating an audience. Recently I entered that group into the outcomes research study. The results will be completed in July.

This aspect of the Connections program has come to be called "Salud Popular." Originally Salud Popular

began years ago as a way to energize the study and practice of wellness by blending traditions long practiced in the Mexican culture with a modern understanding of western scientific techniques. There was concern that time-tested wellness techniques and traditions might be lost, thrown out with the superstitions. Proponents brought the concept to San Antonio.

At that time I was a natural foods instructor and beginning to learn the Chinese health care system which emphasizes what are known as the "three free therapies"; proper diet, exercise and deep relaxation. These form the basis of self-care and are Tai Chi and Chi Gong incorporate exercise and deep relaxation into one therapy. I met one of the Salud Popular organizers in 1991 and immediately felt a kinship with the idea as I had been raised by an Otomi Indian from Guanajuato, Ignacia Saavedra, who was like a mother to me. We began forming study groups in various parishes around the city.

The study groups consisted of 10 to 15 people and would meet weekly. Discussions centered on the Mexican use of herbs, healthy diet and exercise. The discussions of herbal teas always brought back wonderful memories because most of the participants could remember their mothers and grandmothers using simple tea remedies for colds and insomnia and stomach aches.

As we all know, our current medical system is becoming overburdened with people who don't know how to take care of themselves with proper diet and movement. It seems clear that training people to

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Connections Outreach Instructor Mary Martha McNeel brings the participants at St. Philip of Jesus Parish through a series of slow-movement mediation exercises.



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practice wellness could greatly reduce medical care costs both for the people and the system as a whole. Secondly, many corporations are beginning to cut back on subsidizing health care. So the focus is changing for the consumer from “what can you do for me?” to more internal investigation of “what can I do for myself?” These workshops are researching and verifying the results of movement practice and dietary therapy on simple self care.

After each session with the group at the Cortez Library where we practice Tai Chi/Chi Gong, we talk about their private practice and how they are exercising on their own. Each session ends with participants talking about how much more relaxed they feel. One woman came to class recently with burning pain in the back of her neck. Another was exhausted after a hard day of work at a new plant. After one hour of practice the pain was gone; the exhaustion replaced with energy.

The long term goals of these wellness groups are to encourage and develop self-care methods from cultures that have used these techniques for centuries with proven results. Making these techniques accessible to larger segments of the population through adult education could encourage citizens to

take better care of themselves as well as reduce the burden on our health care system.

The *Connections* outreach program is providing a means for people to move back into a state of deep relaxation and well being.

Anyone interested in these programs can call Debbie at 829-7561, Ext. 187.

Other outreach classes

Connections is also sponsoring a five-week summer African drum circle program for **all ages** beginning July 12 at St. Bonaventure Parish Hall, 1918 Palo Alto Rd. Drumming is good for the heart, mind and soul. You can bring your own percussion instrument or play one that’s provided. Steve Austad is the facilitator.

Movement meditation classes are held each Friday, noon-1 p.m., at the Billa Community Family Resource and Learning Center, 1033 Ada St. near the old McCreless Mall area. Mary Martha McNeel is the instructor.

Both programs are free to the public and no registration is required. If you would like more information, please call Debbie Gonzales at 829-7561, Ext. 187.