

Exercising optimism

Tai Chi and dance classes keep Parkinson's patients moving

• By MIRIAM KATES LOCK

Photos: MARC ISRAEL SELLEM

If on a Monday morning you happen to be walking through the Rose Garden in Talbiyeh, you might encounter Danny Loney with his students as they perform a series of Tai Chi movements in a shaded area of the garden. Although to the untrained observer Tai Chi looks like a graceful dance, it is actually a sequence of specific movements that require slow, deep breathing and a great deal of practice.

Tai Chi is a Chinese martial art practiced for its many benefits, such as improving balance, developing flexibility and strengthening muscles and joints. Loney has been studying Tai Chi in Jerusalem for 20 years. It was Arie and Anne Breslow of the Jerusalem School of Tai Chi Chuan who inspired him to continue with his Tai Chi training since the early 1990s. Loney was one of the Breslows' first Jerusalem students and continues to take part in Arie's weekly Friday morning class in the same park.

About 14 years ago, when Loney was 49, he began to have difficulty moving his left shoulder during warm-up exercises and getting his left hand into the right position for the Tai Chi form. A year later, he developed a slight tremor. He went to a neurologist and was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease.

More than 20,000 people in Israel have Parkinson's, a disease characterized by muscle rigidity, tremors and changes in speech and gait. Parkinson's, most often diagnosed between the ages of 50 and 65, gradually affects the way one moves and walks, making daily activities an increasing challenge. The progression of the symptoms is different for each person, and while there is no known cure, there are various ways to alleviate the symptoms. In addition to the medication prescribed for PD, physical exercise can make a significant difference in the lives of sufferers.

Loney was determined to stay upbeat and keep himself in shape to the best of his ability. Today, 14 years later, he controls his symptoms with a carefully balanced regimen of medication, a low-fat vegetarian diet and Tai Chi, along with other forms of exercise. Tai Chi helps him control the major symptoms of PD, keeping his muscles strong and relaxed, staying in balance and walking comfortably.



Danny Loney's class. Loney started teaching Tai Chi after he realized how much it helped him control his own Parkinson's symptoms.

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Danny Loney

After realizing how much Tai Chi helped him control his PD symptoms, he decided that he wanted to share his knowledge with other Parkinson's sufferers. He contacted the Israel Parkinson's Association and soon began to teach Tai Chi to others with PD. In addition

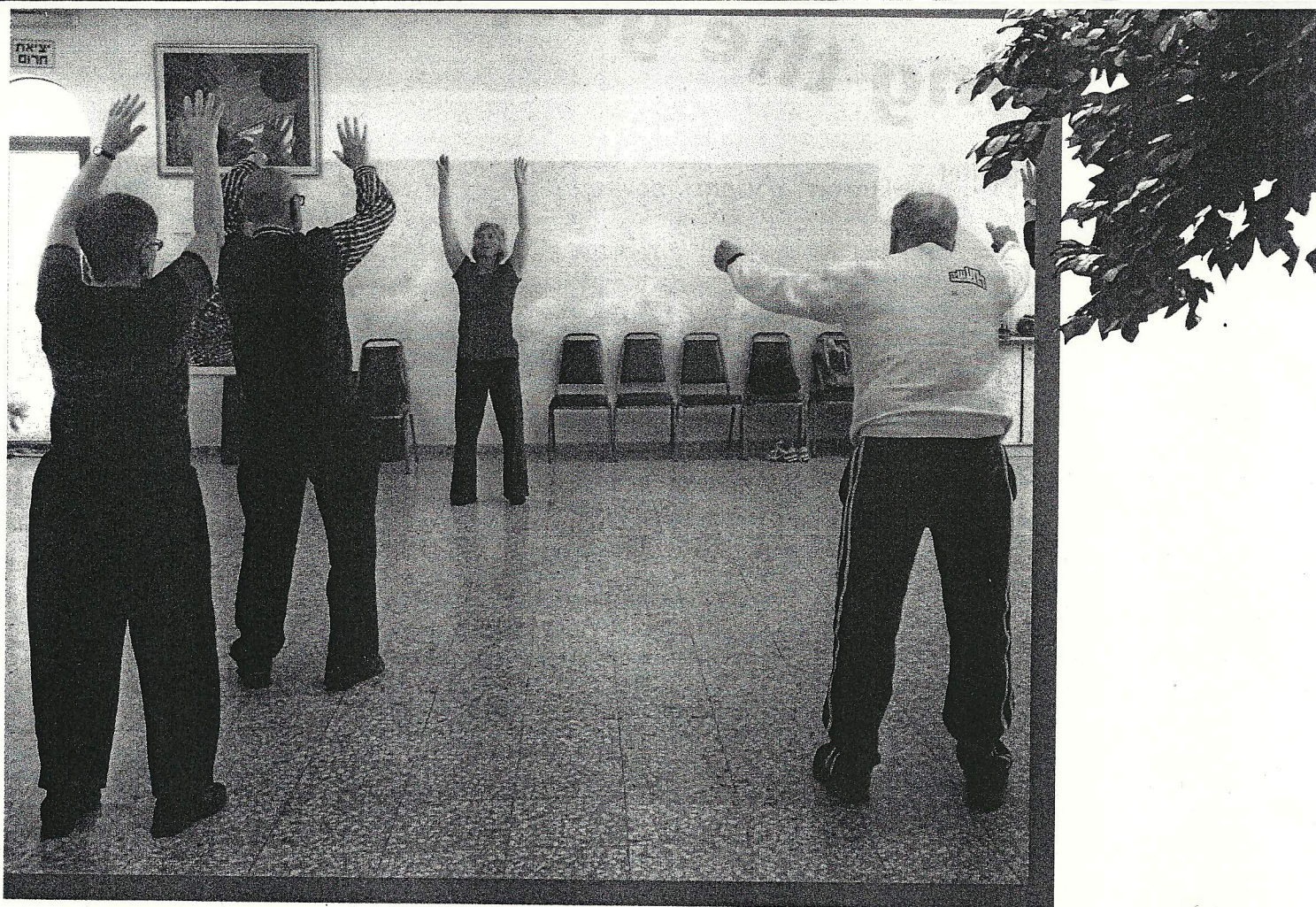
to his Jerusalem group, Loney has taught in Modi'in and travels internationally to teach workshops. He has become increasingly involved in the IPA, and after retiring in 2008 from his job as a computer engineer, he spends a large amount of his time doing volunteer work for the association.

"Tai Chi has saved my life," Loney says, "it slowed down the progression of my symptoms, and it helps me maintain my flexibility and stability in walking. It also helps me calm my mind."

He adds that Parkinson's has forced him to slow down and evaluate his life. When asked what his goal is today, his answer is "To help others and show them how Tai Chi has helped me."

He is also planning to expand the number of Tai Chi for Parkinson's classes in Israel by training instructors.

ABOUT THREE years ago, the Mark Morris Dance Company from Brooklyn, New York, came to Israel for a performance in Tel Aviv. The MMDC runs a unique dance program tailored to people with Parkinson's



Anne Breslow teaches Dance for Parkinson's.

disease, using dance to help people with PD move and stretch in ways that improve flexibility and muscle strength.

While in Israel, the company contacted the Israel Parkinson's Association and offered to teach a dance class to Parkinson's patients. Loney was at that class. He became enthused about the idea and joined forces with a yoga teacher to start a similar class. Although neither of them was a professional dancer, they began co-teaching a class in Jerusalem that was a combination of Tai Chi, yoga and dancing. Realizing that they needed to get a professional dancer involved, Loney turned to Anne Breslow of the Jerusalem School of Tai Chi Chuan. In addition to being a Tai Chi instructor, she is a professional dancer and dance teacher.

Originally from Ottawa, Canada, Breslow has been living in Israel for more than 25 years and has many years of teaching experience in Israel and North America. She agreed to teach the class, and in late 2010 she began teaching Dance for Parkinson's at the Yad Sarah center on Herzl Boulevard in conjunction with the IPA. About nine months ago the class was moved to Congregation Mevakshei Derech at 22 Shai Agnon Street.

ON A rainy spring morning in Jerusalem, 10 people sit in a semi-circle facing the slim, blonde instructor. The music begins, and a soft, slightly bewitching Chinese

melody fills the air as the members of the class do deep breathing exercises and gentle self-massage. Then the music changes to a jazzy, upbeat tune, and the group raise their arms above their heads in unison. The participants of Breslow's Wednesday morning dance class are people with Parkinson's, together with assorted spouses and caregivers. As PD affects every person differently, each individual has his or her own specific challenges and difficulties. One thing, however, is the same for everyone – they all enjoy and benefit from their hour with Breslow. She guides them through a series of movements which stretch and move different parts of the body. After 10 to 15 minutes in a sitting position, the group rise from their chairs and the music changes again, to a slightly quicker rhythm. Individually and then in pairs, they move across the room in a dance.

"There are two types of Parkinson's disease," explains Prof. Ilan Salomon, a professor in the Department of Geography and the School of Public Policy at the Hebrew University. Salomon was diagnosed with Parkinson's 10 years ago. "The first type is characterized by stiffness in the whole body, and the second type is characterized by tremors," he says. He decided to join the dance class as part of his treatment plan and is glad he did.

"Before," he says with a grin, "I hadn't danced for about 50 years."

The wife of a man with PD comments how wonderful

it is what a little music and movement can do for a person. Breslow agrees.

"For the members of the class, it is a joyous encounter," she says. "Music makes them happy; people who walk with great difficulty are getting up to dance, getting into the rhythm and moving."

While movement and dance cannot stop the progression of the symptoms of Parkinson's disease, their benefits can make a huge difference in the person's quality of life. Movement reduces stiffness and limbers the body, making the person feel better both physically and psychologically. The social benefits of dance class are not any less important. There is a warm sense of camaraderie in the group. The participants pay attention to how the others are doing, noticing each other's improvements and cheering each other on.

Breslow says she is continually inspired by the class and the progress made by each participant. "It's amazing to see them move more and more each week," she says.

While Tai Chi and dance have been researched for their benefits to people with Parkinson's disease, you don't have to read research studies to understand what both disciplines can do for a person with PD. Just go to the class.

For more information about Tai Chi and Dance for Parkinson's, call Danny Loney at 054-576-7157 or Anne Breslow at 052-222-1157. •