

HOLISTIC HEALTH

Zen Village owner envisions free yoga lessons for seniors

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Master Chufei Tsai holds a relaxation period after her yoga class ends at Zen Village in Coconut Grove.

Master Chufei Tsai stands over a group of two dozen kindergartners at the Barnyard Community Center in the West Grove on a Wednesday afternoon.

Together, they hold up their fingers and intonate "OM." Under Tsai's instructions, their tiny bodies shift into yoga poses.

"We have very aggressive children," says Sylvia Jordan, director of the center. "This calms them down."

Tsai, who has been giving free bi-weekly lessons to the children for years, plans to bring the same soothing, healing environment to low-income seniors.

She hopes to join forces with The Health Foundation of South Florida to start Heart for Humanity, a program that would offer free yoga and meditation to low-income seniors in Miami-Dade County. Baby boomers who may not have the money for holistic health -- or see it as a priority -- have become her latest personal mission.

She has applied for a small grant -- under \$20,000 -- and the foundation says it has a very good chance of getting passed. The foundation will decide in the next couple months if Tsai's vision will become a reality.

Tsai, the one-time spiritual advisor to the prime minister of Taiwan, owns Zen Village in Coconut Grove, where people gather for yoga and "spiritual healing."

"She's an interesting person," said Peter Wood, vice president of programs at the foundation. "She seems to have a unique set of skills and training that could be helpful to the community."

Similar programs aimed at lower-income groups have been launched in other cities with positive results.

In Harlem, the New York City Department of Health has teamed with Terri Kennedy, chair of the Board of Yoga Alliance, to provide free yoga classes.

"We wanted to make it culturally, physically, economically accessible and acceptable," Kennedy said.

Dozens of people show up for the classes every week, from ages 3 to 83.

"In a lot of ways the people who need yoga the most are the ones who have the least access to it. People in low-income urban areas, people who may have developed bad habits at a young age or have not been exposed to this," she added.

Free yoga already exists in Miami -- popular programs include Bayfront Park on weekday nights and on South Beach sand on weekend mornings. But those programs are not aimed at any particular group.

The county's affluent areas are cluttered with yoga studios that offer sculpted bodies, stress-free minds and enlightened souls -- but they're not free.

"The majority of people here have a lack of income support to live well in this community," Tsai said. ``They don't have real time or real money to give to themselves. This will help."

Tsai, 48, grew up in affluence in Taiwan and studied to be a nun and a nurse. She spent a decade in the remote areas of the Himalayas, building schools and providing food, clothing and classes for local orphanages.

Seven years ago, she moved to South Florida.

Her biggest public project to date was chairing the committee that brought the Dalai Lama to Miami in 2005.

"It's very difficult," she said of her mission, as her 5- and 6-year-olds clasp their hands, close their eyes and stretch. ``This kind of facility or service should be able to provide for the majority."

<http://www.miamiherald.com/living/health/story/441801.html>