

Relaxing the world !

New technology, social media, crazy world politics, lack of respect for each other are all factors seemingly leading to a more stressful life. There are many clanging and clashing things and people demanding instant responses.

Time out and contemplation seem to be shoved aside, a thing of the past.

There is something that can help restore a little balance. Tai Chi, the Chinese art of exercise and breathing techniques is being taught on the Fleurieu by Jen Binney.

1. Who is Jen Binney ?

Born in Newcastle, NSW, one of six children of a Congregational (later Uniting) church minister. Jennifer Shephard loved basketball, tennis and all things physical so it was no surprise that she became one of the early dedicated physical education primary school trained teachers, part of a new faculty at the Heights campus at Modbury. Her teaching career led her to meeting Bruce Binney and together they moved to Kingston in the South East. Then back to live at Greenock for four years, where they brought up two sons, and Bruce taught at Gawler. Cowell on Eyre Peninsula was the next appointment where Jen resumed teaching part-time. During their seven years here her leadership skills developed and she moved from being a deputy principal, to a role across the whole region, based out of Whyalla, finding ways to help students facing behavioural difficulties. Roles in other schools, like Port Elliot, Mount Barker and Murray Bridge, followed.

2. How and when did she discover tai chi ?

Jen says she came to discover tai chi three ways. Firstly, she went to a “boys in education” conference in Newcastle in 1999, where one of the guest speakers, Dutch educator Freerk Ykema talked about an inspirational programme “rock and water” which taught boys about how to understand their limits and inner feelings. Part of the solution was teaching elements of martial arts and exercises from tai chi, the ancient Chinese art of breathing and exercising. Jen said she was so moved by this, that she later spent time with Freerk in Adelaide and began incorporating his philosophy into her programmes especially for students with challenging behaviours.

Secondly, while working at Murray Bridge, Jen was trampled by a local escaping bull as she tried to fasten the school gate. Her natural physical flexibility and calmness probably saved her life. Bruised and otherwise unharmed physically, the traumatic episode shocked her into re-evaluating her life. Thirdly, the death of a close friend from cancer led to seeking time out and healing and balance in her own life. Weekly classes of tai chi with Goolwa teacher, Karen Anderson followed.

3. How did this lead to teaching tai chi?

Jen says she felt that tai chi could be an important part of anyone’s well-being. It certainly has improved her own. She sought out teacher Roman Czernaisky in Sydney, who opened up her mind to “feeling” the movements and listening internally, rather than just following the moves.

“Karen taught me the form, Roman connected me back to myself, and John Hartley of Inner Health Taijiquan, opened me up to energy and starting to feel the principles in my body,” Jen said.

With confidence as a consultant/teacher of self-awareness programmes for children in schools, Jen began classes in Qi Gong (breathing) in Strathalbyn.

In 2014, she advertised classes in tai chi in Milang, Goolwa and continued classes in Strathalbyn, including the U3A classes she had been running for 15 years.

4. What part does tai chi play in your life?

Jen continues to do weekly sessions with sifu John Hartley in Adelaide, and says she tries to spend at least 20 minutes to an hour every morning and evening as well as her nine weekly classes. Interstate workshops connect her with a greater tai chi family.

Tai chi is really part of my everyday life. It incorporates exercises for the mind, body, and develops an emotional and spiritual connection.

5. How many classes do you have and where and what kind of tai chi is it ?

Jen takes nine classes a week plus one-to-one sessions. The classes vary from week to week, but include wu chi, Qi gong, mindful walking and sometimes aspects of the four “pillars” or form. One class at Strathalbyn involves the traditional 108 movements or form.

For most, it is about the art of relaxing and understanding their body, relieving tension and stresses of everyday life.

The classes are held at Strathalbyn Senior Citizens’ Hall, Milang old school house, and in Goolwa at the Aquatic Club, Anglican Hall and Lakeside.

6. What’s a prerequisite, or why would anyone think about joining a class ?

Jen says people come to her class because they are seeking to find some balance or relaxation in their life. Some come to help with rehabilitation or to help with balance, flexibility, and joint mobility. Others come because they’ve seen groups of people in Asia exercise in the early morning and have been impressed by the serenity created in a busy life.

The first lesson is free and is always a “come and try”.

7. Tell us a heart-warming success story about tai chi.

Jen is inspired by the 92 year old lady in her who class built up enough confidence and strength to fulfil her dream of continuing to travel.

Another woman has become pain free in her hands and enjoyed the ability to write again; a man with limited mobility is finding ways to feel confident about his ability and more balance; an eight year old girl has told Jen she has now found her calm centre. Fifteen year old boys she taught in Mount Barker have grudgingly admitted it did them some good.

It is different for every person.

Jen says she continues to learn little by little every day and it just gets better and better.

“I’m a great believer that the right teacher appears at the right time, “she says.

”I trust that I inspire my students like they inspire me. It is a process so I’m glad I’m in it and gaining better health along the way.”

8. When you’re not tai chi-ing, what do you love doing? Or is tai chi ever present?

Yes, tai chi is ever present, but there is a love of body surfing, cooking, eating good food and wine with family and friends, gardening and just being in nature. Even on camping adventures Jen finds time for the peace and mindfulness tai chi brings.

9. What does the year ahead hold for you...what are your goals and dreams?

Jen has compiled a book of poems she plans to publish during 2018. Many of these feature on the weekly handouts from classes, accompanied by photographs from nature. Inspired by her nephew, Jen will donate some of the funds raised to cystic fibrosis research and assistance

She jokes that her goal, with her mentor John, is to relax the world.

It is quite a stressful world. More tai chi is needed.