

Chatting with Ruth Barenbaum

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Ruth Barenbaum was featured by WCAX
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[Tai Chi](#) (or Taiji) is a regimen known for developing practitioners' longevity. It is not unusual to see octogenarian Tai Chi masters teaching in China, but it takes a unique person to be certified as a first-time Tai Chi instructor at age 80. Ruth Barenbaum is one such individual; I caught up with her recently to talk about her Tai Chi journey.



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Born as Ruth Schwarzkopt, she is the older sister of late General and national hero, [Norman Schwarzkopt](#). Due to her father's military career, Ruth and her family traveled and lived in Iran, Switzerland and Germany while she was young. Maybe because of her early exposure to different cultures, Ruth always has an open attitude toward cultural diversity. She later married Professor Simon Barenbaum, a French Jew who survived the Holocaust.

Ruth recalled when they first moved to East Middlebury, a college town in Vermont where Simon taught French literature at [Middlebury College](#), the atmosphere there was liberal. One day she attended a women only conference. A young woman stripped down to her waist and performed flowing movements that were compelling and beautiful. Ruth was delighted to find out that it was Tai Chi and she did not have to be naked to learn the art. Then, through word of mouth, she found out that there was a Tai Chi class offered in Burlington attended by artists. She tried it a few times but it was just too far to drive there on a regular basis. One day she learned there was a Tai Chi master from China teaching in Montreal, Canada. Without any idea of his name or his school location, she went to the Chinatown in Montreal. She was determined to find him. She asked people on the street where she could learn Tai Chi. Finally she came in front of an older gentleman in a YMCA. She bowed and asked to learn the art. Master Lee (or Li) raised his head from eating rice and asked why. She stated because Tai Chi is a beautiful form of exercise. He was candid and direct and corrected her that Tai Chi is not exercise. She stayed there for a while and saw at least 40 young men push hands. She sometimes joined the class but the reality was that she could not stay in Montreal and study Tai Chi for an extended period of time. Back in Middlebury, Tai Chi instructors came and left. Ruth took several classes with a few instructors and learned Yang Style forms of 12, 14, 24 and others. It seems that she

was always the oldest in the class and not particularly welcomed by fellow classmates, but that did not deter her. She continued to learn whenever she had an opportunity. Later, she also learned Sun Style Tai Chi and [Qigong](#).

About two and half years ago, Ruth saw an announcement that the [Champlain Valley Agency on Aging \(CVAA\)](#) would train instructors to teach seniors “Tai Chi for Arthritis”. Ruth called and inquired whether she was eligible for training since she was 80 years old. She was embraced by the organization wholeheartedly. Ruth was a pleasant addition for the training program due to her sufficient knowledge of the art and she was able to assist teaching as well.

Once again, Ruth is the oldest in the class! She is even older than her students. Most of her students are in their 60’s and 70’s and only one in her 80’s. There was a math professor in his 50’s. In 2011, Ruth taught 11 beginner programs plus maintenance classes and logged 5,264 miles by driving to nearby towns three times a week. She was honored as “2012 Volunteer of the Year” by the Champlain Valley Agency on Aging. Last year, the local TV station WCAX also featured her as “Super Senior”. So far, she has taught about 400 people. Her students told her that Tai Chi helps them tremendously. One farmer was in his 70’s and could not turn his head. Now he practices Tai Chi in the morning before he goes out to drive his tractor. Some of her students were injured from yoga practice and now they are practicing Tai Chi for therapy. One student in her 60’s stated “I feel beautiful when practicing Tai Chi.” Ruth does not only help them with physical balance, muscle strengthening and emotional harmony, she also inspires some of them to pursue the same goal of becoming a Tai Chi instructor to help people. You can read other testimonies via a link here <http://www.salutetoseniorservice.com/volunteer-contest/entries/ruth-b/>.

In addition to helping people through Tai Chi, Ruth also participates in “Meals on Wheels,” the program delivering food to seniors and tutors reading. Another favorite of her pastimes is making collages. She donated some of her beautiful art work for charity fundraising.

It turns out that Ruth is not the only person practicing Tai Chi in her family. Her son-in-law and digital mogul, [Jonathan Miller](#), is also a Tai Chi aficionado. They have traveled different paths and he studies Chen Style Tai Chi. But when there is a family gathering, Tai Chi sometimes is a common topic. Ruth recalled that during a recent Christmas party, Jon, a friend and her discussed how long one has to practice Tai Chi before feeling the Qi. They even talked about how to do “Push the Mountain” down to the detailed hand movements.

Ruth is modest. She said that Tai Chi is so profound that she used to think that she could never be knowledgeable or skillful enough to teach the art. She is grateful for the opportunity to open a door for others to realize the beauty and health benefits of the art. At the same time, she continues to enhance her own knowledge. Last year she took an online course on Dragon and Tiger Qigong. She has also included Qigong in her class curriculum. She said that once people feel the Qi, they become serious

students.

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