

# Tai Chi bring happiness to adults with Down syndrome

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Adults from Albert Pujols Center performed during 2014 World Tai Chi & Qigong Day celebration at Chesterfield Mall, April 26, 2014.

*Pam Bearden*

During the recent [World Tai Chi & Qigong Day celebration](#) in St. Louis, MO, over 20 [Tai Chi](#) instructors and their students demonstrated more than a dozen forms. Audience were inspired by a senior group and young practitioners in their 20's. Then, there were masters whose skills dazzled the attendees. However, the adults with [Down syndrome](#) from [Albert Pujols Wellness Center for Adults with Down Syndrome](#) won the greatest applause.



*Kate Rueschhoff*

According to [National Down Syndrome Society](#), Down syndrome occurs when an individual has a full or partial extra copy of chromosome 21. This additional genetic material alters the course of development and causes the characteristics associated with Down syndrome. A few of the common physical traits of Down syndrome are low muscle tone, small stature, an upward slant to the eyes, and a single deep crease across the center of the palm. Many of them feel challenged with mobility, speech and concentration during their daily life.

[Albert Pujols Wellness Center for Adults with Down Syndrome](#) is part of St. Luke's Hospital located in St. Louis. Its mission is to help adults with Down syndrome to be independent and live a healthier life. Stacey Laughlin, who is in charge of program coordination, said that Down syndrome adults have the same health issues and suffer from the same illnesses as general population, i.e. diabetes, hypertension, etc. The difference is that their health issues start much younger than others. Almost all Down syndrome adults suffer from dementia and some of them experience onset in their 30's. The life expectancy of people with Down syndrome is significantly less than the general population's. But in recent years, due to the awareness of the syndrome, more preventative measurements have been introduced; the life expectancy has been lengthened. Albert Pujols Center does not replace the primary care but provides nutrition guidance, exercise therapy, emotional wellness, and social services, which can effectively enhance the quality of their life and potentially increase their lifespan.

Even though she does not practice Tai Chi, Stacey realizes the health benefits that Tai Chi provides. She wanted to find someone who is not just a Tai Chi instructor but also has experience working with people with disability. Through a diligent search, she found [Sara Kuanfung](#), who is also a licensed Physical Therapist, licensed Massage Therapist, and Certified Personal Trainer. The Tai Chi program is six-week-long with one-hour class each week. Sara stated their Tai Chi classes incorporated physical therapy movements, warm-up, and a short Tai Chi form. She said Tai Chi is incredibly rich in teaching people how to breathe, maintain body physical balance, and coordinate body movements. Tai Chi

makes people more aware of their body. Sara does not teach Tai Chi theory nor does she use Tai Chi terminology in her classes. Instead she utilizes common words like making a circle, swinging an arm, and turning a pizza. Per Sara, Tai Chi is great from a rehab perspective. So far, Albert Pujols Center had a few Tai Chi sessions. The reaction has been great. Many students come back for new sessions.

In Sara's class, students take turns to lead the practice with Sara's assistance. They are willing to share what they learn with each other and sometimes help correct other's movements. During my visit to their practice class, I witnessed the camaraderie among them.

Stacey mentioned the feedback from the students and their families was overwhelmingly positive. Stacey remembered that one mother told her that it was a mesmerizing experience for her to watch her son practice Tai Chi on the patio by himself. He was calm and mindful. I interviewed a couple of the adults with Down syndrome after their performance at World Tai Chi & Qigong Day celebration. They mentioned that Tai Chi made them "comfortable", happy, and calm.

There are more than 400,000 people living with Down syndrome in the United States. Down syndrome occurs in people of all races and economic levels. Currently, as one of few centers in the nation, Albert Pujols Center is serving the metro St. Louis area and mid-Missouri. But patients from neighboring states Illinois and Arkansas attend their programs. It would be good if more centers like Albert Pujols Center can be devoted to adults with Down syndrome and more centers will offer Tai Chi classes to improve the quality of life of this under-served demographic group.

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**Violet Li**

Tai Chi Examiner



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