

You are never too old to learn Tai Chi, just ask Ginger.

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Ginger Charter demonstrates Tai Chi Sword

Violet Li

A few weeks ago, I visited [Technique Studios](#), in St. Louis, for a story. While I was interviewing James Ford, the [Tai Chi](#) instructor and owner of the Studios, an older lady with silver hair stepped in with a straight sword on her side. She walked steadily and agilely. Once she set the sword down on a bench. She started to stretch and warm up. “Is she a student here”, I asked. “Oh, yes. That’s Ginger”, replied James.

I observed the Tai Chi class and noticed that Ginger was doing well and performed the entire Yang Style 24 Form in an absence of a lead. She was a little bit rusty when they practiced the combined Yang Style 32 Form and the Straight Sword form. Actually most students required instructions for the sword movements and their sequencing -- after all, they had just started learning it.

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Out of curiosity, I approached Ginger after the class for her age. Surprisingly, she is 83 and even more

shocking, she never studied Tai Chi until a couple of years ago. It is extremely impressive to learn three forms in two years.

Tai Chi is known for its benefit of promoting longevity. It is not unusual to find adults practice Tai Chi in their 80's or 90's and even past 100 (click a link [here](#) to read and watch a 100-year old Tai Chi practitioner). Nevertheless, it was my first encounter with someone studying a traditional Tai Chi form first time past the age of 80 and remembering it.

Virginia (Ginger) Carter graduated from the Sociology Department of Cornell University in New York. But her true love is textile. She later took graduate work on Textile Conservation, Machine Embroidery and other subjects from Kansas State University, Brescia College and other institutes. She is a well-accomplished textile appraiser and conservationist for museums and individual establishments. She has been sewing and lecturing on sewing for 20 years around the country and in Canada at many organizations including [the Valentine Museum in Richmond Virginia](#). She has authored *A Handbook Of Metal Threads For Embroiderers* and articles for trade journals. Her textile creations were prize-awarded and published in books and magazines.

Ginger is also interested in the social and cultural fabric of mankind. She has travelled extensively to at least 50 countries, including Cambodia, Cameroon, China, Egypt, Ethiopia, European countries, Ghana, India, Japan, Jordan, Laos, Mali, Polynesia, Yemen and many more. Her mission is to collect different ethnic fabrics especially the hand-made textile from the minority culture groups. She learns the history of the fabric during trips and their methods of fabric construction and embellishment. The remarkable discovery is all of those fabrics are basically made with three different kinds of stitches.

Last Fall, she went to [Bhutan](#), located at the eastern end of the [Himalayas](#) with landscape ranging from [subtropical](#) plains in the south to the Sub-alpine Himalayan heights in the north, with some peaks exceeding 7,000 meters (23,000 ft). She recalled that she climbed many hills among otherwise young tourists. She witnessed a religious festival in which Bhutanese monks dance on the streets with face masks. According to her, the monk dance is very exciting and a way of storytelling focusing on morality. Families and children all come out to watch the dance. The sight and sound resonated with her. She came home and painted a Bhutanese dancer (see Slide Show at the left).

Ginger does not just care about fabric conservation; she is extremely conscientious about the environment. She thinks it is appalling how wasteful society is (i.e. a small pair of scissors coming in a large package of plastic and cardboard) and how we are polluting nature (Government should outlaw plastic bags!). In a current art exhibit, [Maturity and Its Muse: Celebrating Artists over 70](#) (Oct 1, 2010 – Jan. 29, 2011) at the Sheldon Art Gallery, Ginger's *Secret Garden* is a beautiful quilt dotted with reused plastic pieces (see Slide Show at the left).

Ginger keeps herself active physically. She volunteers for various charity events and plays tennis twice

a week. But why pick up Tai Chi? She recalled a trip to China in 1981 and how fascinating that people practiced Tai Chi in parks. One of her close friends in California has been studying Tai Chi for a few years. So when her daughter Wendy Richards suggested taking Tai Chi together, she said yes.

Now she is taking two Tai Chi classes a week and practices between them. Even though she has played tennis for years, “...Tai Chi works your body all over again”, stated Ginger, and “Tai Chi also makes me focus better”. She has noticed that her balance and flexibility have improved. Many people try Tai Chi but quit due to the difficulty in learning it. For Ginger, she said that she is too old to be embarrassed. She is not afraid to ask questions. She does not mind being corrected in front of her fellow classmates. And she is grateful for her teachers Len Bissa and James Ford for being patient with her.

Even though Ginger has not mastered a Tai Chi form yet, she certainly internalizes the essence of this art: letting go of the ego, embracing nature and being a true artist.

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