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Class sponsored by UG Parks and Rec, KCK Huggers

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By SAM HARTLE, Kansan Staff Writer

With a backdrop of dimmed lights and Middle Eastern music echoing softly in the background, 14 mentally and physically challenged athletes from a Kansas City, Kan., and Wyandotte County Parks and Recreation class demonstrated their mastery of Tai Chi last week at the Armourdale Recreation Center.



The demonstration was part a celebration that culminated with the students receiving certificates of achievement for completing the 12-week Tai Chi I course.

"I like being able to see my friends," said athlete Carol Gunnels, describing her favorite part of the class. "They're all easy to talk to and get along with."

The class was lead by Jim Starshak, who owns the Home Gym, a Shawnee, Kan. based business offering fitness-related activities. Anne Phillips, Unified Government Special Populations program director, coordinated the athletes and the class.

"This class tries to integrate the mind and the body," said Starshak. "It's meditation in motion - by relaxing the mind, it's very easy to achieve success."

This fall was the first time Starshak taught the class, though the Arthritis Foundation of America has been offering this form of instruction for more than 15 years.

"It's not just another activity that takes up time," Starshak said. "They can apply what they learn here in other activities they are involved in."

The students added a number of moves throughout the course, eventually building in all six movements that comprise the first component of Tai Chi. Starshak noted the program is more about making sure the students are having a good time and learning how to relax their bodies than about mastering the art of Tai Chi.

Dan Gray, an athlete who has been involved in UG Parks and Recreation activities for the last

12 years, says the benefits of Tai Chi have helped him in other sports.

"I play basketball, softball and track and field, and this helps my body relax before I do those sports," Gray said after the demonstration.

The program is funded through a combination of user fees and assistance from the Kansas City, Kan., Huggers program. The KCK Huggers pay for about half of the costs.

"Any program like this has to be self-sufficient," said Phillips, who in addition to her duties at the UG, is the executive director of KCK Huggers. "We have a lot of volunteers who have been involved for a long time - they really make these programs happen."

Starshak says he's seen more hugs and laughs in this class than in any other class he taught, and believes that people could use more of that feeling in other areas of life.

"It's hard to put into words my feelings about this class," Starshak said. "After the first class, I heard that they were practicing some Tai Chi in some of their other activities - it felt good to be able make that kind of an impact."

For Jennifer Smith, a 16-year veteran of the special athletes program, the benefits of Tai weren't quite as difficult to put in to words.

"It's been a lot of fun," she said.

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