

The Group Portrait: Neighborhood Fitness

The Lower East Side seniors who organized their own t'ai chi class.

By Valeria Ricciulli

AFTER GRAND STREET SETTLEMENT, a community center on the Lower East Side, suspended its senior programs in March 2020, 74-year-old Kay Mantin missed the daily t'ai chi classes she had attended for the previous 11 years. "T'ai chi helps with memory," Mantin says. "It's important, at our age, to keep our minds alert." A few months into lockdown, Mantin got a call from her friend and neighbor Alice Cheng, a volunteer instructor at Grand Street. Many of her students also lived in their apartment complex; why not organize a t'ai chi class outdoors? For the past 15 months, the class has gathered nearly every morning at eight (in the winter, they wore puffy jackets). On June 1, Mayor de Blasio announced that New York's 249 senior centers could finally reopen on June 14, but the date seemed tenuous: Providers had only a couple of weeks to figure out how to put new health-and-safety protocols in place, and they didn't know where the funding for equipment like new HVAC units could come from. For now, Mantin and her friends are keeping up their sessions, an antidote to pandemic-induced loneliness. "We cannot live without t'ai chi; otherwise, we're gonna slow down and get shorter and older," Orlando Sánchez says. "That's how we keep moving."



Left row (from front): Lily Li, Kwei Sim Wong, Elvie Roman, Joyce Ravitz, Kay Mantin. Middle row: Orlando Sánchez, Karen Liang, Amy Ma, Sandy Wu, Terry Tam. Right row: Margaret Lin, Nancy Rose Bartow, Yeeso Leong, Francis Sussman, Peter Lung.