

## FEELING THE CHI | BY CAROL B.

It was luck that brought me to the Valley Points Family YMCA. Luck that came my way in early January of this year through a casual phone call with my friend, Darlene, in Florida. She had just had surgery and couldn't play tennis during her recovery, so she had taken up Tai Chi. She loves it. She told me this because she knew I was having a tough time recovering from my own detached retina surgery and that during my recuperation, I had gotten a terrible cold which made everything worse. She also knew that I had been diagnosed with a serious blood cancer in January of 2015, and that since that time I have been on a daily "cocktail" of oral and intravenous chemotherapies, any one of which can create side effects throughout the body. For me the side effects were a lack of balance and weakness issues, along with nerve damage in my feet, which is called neuropathy. Those feet were now seemingly two cement blocks attached to the ends of my legs, and the tingling and burning were accompanied by an overall tightness and numbness, along with the feeling that my toes had died.

Initially, I had controlled the swelling in my feet (another side effect of chemo) with a walking program around my neighborhood. As the neuropathy progressed, my gait changed to a shuffle, as I was no longer able to lift my feet as I should. Because of my doddering, I ended up tripping over the edge of a sidewalk slab and took a nasty fall, which ended my daily walks and my main source of exercise.

By the time of my friend's phone call, I had been homebound for three months and my physical condition was declining rapidly. I had to do something, as the only way I was headed was downhill. Taking Darlene's advice, I called the Y and asked if they offered Tai Chi classes and explained that I would have limitations. I was told that I could sit down for the classes or do whatever I could manage. They kindly emailed me the class schedule and information about the Y. Within the next several days, I stopped in the New Kensington Branch and joined the Y!

As it turned out, they provide a multitude of Tai Chi classes: *Tai Chi for Beginners*, *Tai Chi for Wellness*, *Moving for Better Balance*, and *Tai Chi for Energy*. Alice is the instructor, and not only is she nationally certified, but she is interesting, kind, and caring. I go to as many classes each week as I can, learning about "repulse the monkey," "hold the ball," and "push the mountain." These and the many other moves involved in this Asian noncompetitive martial art are known for their ability to provide health to the mind and body. The Chinese have been doing this for somewhere between 700 and 1,500 years, so I figure there must be something to it!

At first I had to sit down to do the moves. I did not have the strength or balance to stand for the whole class, but it didn't matter, because my feet wouldn't or couldn't move the way I was being taught. I was able to work at my own pace, so I sat when needed or stood when able and I kept doing the moves in the best way I could manage. It helped that the group around me was accommodating to my needs and were friendly and considerate. Besides, I had been housebound for so long, and the socialization was good for me. I was also accepted for who I am—sitting *or* standing—and it became obvious that Tai Chi and the Valley Points Family YMCA were meant for me.

I knew that several weeks ago when I noticed that my feet didn't seem quite as stiff, and when I walked barefoot over the carpet at home and could feel the nap on the bottoms of my feet. Was it possible that Tai Chi was offering some relief from this thing called neuropathy? I don't know, but I'm not going to question it. I do know that I am able to stand up for almost all of my classes, and my feet are more mobile than they have been in over two years.

Yes, it was luck that brought me to the Valley Points Family YMCA—or just maybe it was a blessing.

