



SENIORS

Midlothian couple teaches seniors a new way to move



Page Dowdy/Chesterfield Observer

Mike Williams uses a book and bolsters to demonstrate on his wife, Betty, how he might teach a student to correctly position their foot while walking.

By Marcy Horwitz
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

What do basketball star Julius Erving, comedian Whoopi Goldberg and cellist Yo-Yo Ma have in common? They're all devotees of the Feldenkrais method of movement education.

Moshe Feldenkrais (1904–1984) combined his backgrounds in engineering, physics, martial arts and human development to create this form of learning through gentle movement. It's popular among musicians, dancers and athletes – and increasingly, among seniors.

Although it is not a medical modality, Feldenkrais attracts people with chronic conditions like cerebral palsy and arthritis. Reported benefits include reduction of stress, reduction or elimination of pain, improved breathing and general enhancement of well-being. Although the method is more well-known in Europe than the U.S., Chesterfield County boasts two certified Feldenkrais practitioners.

Mike and Betty Williams, Midlothian residents since their marriage seven years ago, are the force behind Movement Options, a practice dedicated to helping people move out of pain and to gain additional functionality.

Before training as a Feldenkrais practitioner, Betty was an Image Consultant for 20 years. ("I did total makeovers on individuals before makeover shows became popular on TV!" she says.) Mike spent 30 years as an engineer and IT professional in corporate America, "dealing with things that are about 180 degrees away from dealing with people and how they feel." Each had extensive experience with the method as students before committing to becoming practitioners. Each completed a rigorous three- to four-year course of study under the auspices of the Feldenkrais Guild of North America. Now, as Guild Certified Feldenkrais Practitioners®, they help people overcome movement limitations and pain.

How does Feldenkrais work?

"We call our clients 'students' rather than 'patients,'" says Mike. "A session is a 'lesson' rather than a 'treatment' because of the learning that is taking place."

Awareness Through Movement® classes take small groups of people through verbally directed, gentle exercises involving specific movement sequences. Functional Integra-

tion® lessons are one-on-one sessions that address a particular individual's needs or concerns. From seemingly small movements, new and better ways of moving are learned.

For instance, a Feldenkrais practitioner might invite the class to explore the various movements involved in rising from a chair to a standing position. Over the course of an hour, students will focus on their feet: How are they placed when they're sitting in a chair? Is the weight distributed evenly between them, or is one foot carrying more weight than the other? Where is the small of the back? The shoulders? What happens when they rise? What tenses? What relaxes? How does their breathing affect the action of rising? And where are their eyes? How does moving the eyes affect the ability to rise with ease? Or does it make no difference?

Along with a half-dozen or so other area Feldenkrais practitioners, Mike volunteers as a Feldenkrais teacher at the Shepherd's Center of Richmond. He also teaches a weekly class at a local dance studio.

"This work is not just for someone who is injured," Mike says.

He offers a spring golf series designed to help golf enthusiasts improve their power, distance and swing sensitivity in putting. Mike's Functional Integration students include athletes, performing artists, professionals, and household engineers. Betty focuses exclusively on Functional Integration lessons.

As Feldenkrais practitioners, Mike and Betty find satisfaction in seeing how their students progress.

"One of our students has multiple sclerosis. With MS, you get numbing and tingling in the hands and arms. Feldenkrais lessons calm her nervous system, which in turn calms her tingling and reduces the numbness," Betty reports.

"Feldenkrais helped her immensely," adds Mike.

Other students have seen improvements in conditions like fibromyalgia.

There is no "wrong" or "right" way to do Feldenkrais movements; each person finds his or her own way to move, just as people find their own way in life. That is entirely in keeping with the philosophy of Feldenkrais, say Mike and Betty. As Dr. Feldenkrais said, "Trust yourself to work out what is right for you."

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