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Campo musician offers unique class to strengthen breathing and improve lung function

By Cynthia Brian



Jack Pawlakos Photo Cynthia Brian

Many of us take breathing for granted, but for those suffering with respiratory issues, normal breathing is serious business. Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease has the third highest mortality rate in the United States. Over 12 million Americans suffer from COPD as a chronic lung condition making breathing difficult. Emergency room visits have skyrocketed to over 1.4 million annually because of this difficulty.

Lamorinda and the surrounding areas were blanketed in smoke because of the horrendous Camp wildfire in Paradise. The heavy air filled with particulate matter significantly compromised breathing for those with respiratory issues.

Studies indicate a 50 percent loss in lung function between the ages of 30 and 70, and while most Lamorindans are active participants in aerobic activities,

those exercises benefit the heart, endurance and general fitness, but have significantly less benefits for our lungs.

At the request of the American Lung Association, Campolindo High School sophomore and award-winning harmonica player, Jack Pawlakos, designed a program for the Bay Area that improves and strengthens breathing and exercises lungs. Having been inspired by a relative who suffers from pulmonary challenges, Jack jumped at the opportunity to help others. He is a blues harmonica player who played his first big gig at the age of 12 among some of the world's most renowned musicians.

The harmonica is the only musical instrument that has the ability to create stronger lungs and improve breathing. Harmonica programs have been used across the country at places such as the Mayo Clinic, and Baylor Medical Center, but this is a new program to the East Bay. Playing harmonica requires deep inhaled and exhaled. It is one of the few instruments that can achieve this feat. The consistent breathing in and out strengthens the diaphragm facilitating deeper breathing in players. Playing exercises the muscles that help pull and push air out of the lungs. Additionally, abdominal muscles are strengthened, which assists in more effective coughing as well as gaining better control of breathing.

Participants in programs increase their respiratory ability and enjoy reduced anxiety and increased social experiences. An added bonus: playing is fun.

The John Muir Concord Pulmonary Support Group will feature Jack as its guest speaker at 2 p.m. Wednesday, Nov. 28. He will discuss the benefits of playing the harmonica, how it can improve your breathing, and demonstrate an introduction to harmonica playing.

Beginning Saturday, Jan. 5 and every Saturday through March 9 from 9:30 to 10:30 a.m., Jack will teach a class at Pleasant Hill Recreation and Parks District, Course 2352.801, "Play Harmonica, Strengthen Your Lungs!" Registration opens Dec. 3 with a limited class size (<http://pleasanthillrec.com/101/Programs-Activities>).

These fun programs are open to all who would like to improve their health and have a good time learning how to play the harmonica. This class is specifically tailored for COPD and other related pulmonary diseases. The harmonica is an easy to learn instrument that will provide participants with an increased quality of life. No musical experience is required.

For more information and to register, contact PHPR at (925) 682-0896, and John Muir Hospital Pulmonary Group, (925) 674-2351.

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