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With Fayetteville area project, happiness is yours for the taking

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By Jennifer Calhoun

Staff writer

A little before 9 a.m. on a chilly Saturday, Dr. Sid Gautam shuffled into the lobby of the Kiwanis Recreation Center carrying boxes of grapes, bananas and water.

But he wasn't there to feed the hungry. Not exactly. Not in a physical sense, at least.

Gautam is on a mission to feed souls with happiness.

Every few weeks, he offers a free, two-hour seminar featuring strategies, including breathing techniques, meditation and healthy living tips, to help people achieve the goal that everyone aspires to: happiness.

During a recent seminar, about five people attended, looking for guidance and techniques to help them along. Only three seminars have been held so far, and Gautam times them in between his hectic travel and speaking schedule.

The seminars are part of what Gautam describes as the "happiness project." Gautam, a retired Methodist University economics professor, is the author of the self-help book "Happiness Is You."

Gautam said the project is his way of giving back to the community and offering hope and help.

He doesn't ask for a penny, he said, and even the proceeds from his book go to Society to Educate People, which is described in Gautam's book as "a registered not-for-profit organization dedicated to the dissemination of knowledge that results in the upliftment and betterment of human kind."

"There is more joy in sharing and caring," said Gautam, a short man who often shows his enthusiasm by throwing his arms above his head and exclaiming, "God has given us such a wonderful world! It's full of everything!"

But if Gautam sounds naive or Pollyanna-ish, think again.

Much of what he teaches, he said, is driven by years of research, as well as personal experience.

Over the years, Gautam said, he has worked with many "miserable millionaires," as he likes to call them - people who seemingly have everything and anything they want, but who keep searching for more in an attempt to find happiness.

But happiness isn't like that, he said. While it's a natural state of being, true happiness can only come with work, practice, giving and sacrifice.

"Happiness is a matter of choice, and it's freely available to everyone in the world," he said. "And you don't have to leave your own home to find it."

Gautam also believes people need help training the mind to learn and experience happiness.

"People feel helpless," he said. "(When something is wrong,) people are programmed to think, 'Let's go to the doctor; let's get a pill.'"

But those things are quick fixes that don't always work, Gautam said.

The key to finding true happiness, he said, is to work on it.

"You've got to try. You have to make a habit of happiness."

During a recent seminar, guest speaker Andres Josephs, a yoga teacher at Cape Fear Valley HealthPlex, taught the basics in breathing and meditation.

Josephs said the techniques could help people understand themselves, as well as manage their emotions and reactions, which leads to peace of mind and possibly happiness.

"In the outside world, you cannot control anybody," he said. "You can only understand yourself and react to it."

Gautam also offered simple tips that he reiterates during each session. The tips include drinking plenty of water, eating fruits and vegetables, getting at least seven hours of sleep a night, banishing soft drinks from your diet and sitting in silence for a few minutes every day.

Those simple steps can lead to happiness, he said.

"Our body is a mystical, magical machine," he said. "It can create magic."

Gautam said he hopes for the happiness project to grow.

Eventually, he said, he would like the city to become a center of happiness, perhaps with its own center that teaches happiness tools, such as yoga and meditation.

Josephs agreed.

"What I envision right now ... is to be able to establish a center, a yoga center, where people would learn yoga and apply it to their life," he said.

The center could mean a happier, healthier society, which could mean a better life for everyone, Josephs said.

"A happy society would mean a more conscious society," he said. "It's not possible to be happy unless you see clearly, unless you are able to make broad decisions to improve the future."

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INFORMATION

For more information on the next seminar, call the Kiwanis Center at 433-1568. 'Happiness Is You' is available through Amazon.com. Gautam sells the book at seminars. All proceeds go to the Society to Educate People.