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Allston karate program's primary weapon: community service

Posted by Matt Rocheleau November 2, 2010 05:47 PM

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(Courtesy Jason Gould)

Martial arts drills, like in the above video, are only a part of the curriculum at the dojo in Allston. (To see more videos from the Emerald Necklace Martial Arts studio, [click here](#).)

By Matt Rocheleau, Town Correspondent

In mid-conversation, Jason Gould spots a pea-sized crumb several feet away on the floor of his pristine, no-shoes-allowed martial arts studio, and quickly moves, undistracted from what he's saying, to dispose of the small, rare blemish.

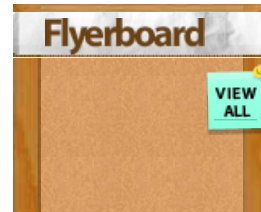
Gould isn't what you'd consider a "neat freak" or "germaphobe," but that attention to detail – knowing what is going on in your surroundings – is exactly what he wants his students to learn.

And the fourth-degree black belt karate instructor applies that lesson, which he calls a form of self defense, far beyond the punching and kicking aspect of his teaching.

Since its inception seven years ago last month, [Emerald Necklace Martial Arts](#) students have led [dozens of area community service projects](#) – including

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knitting hats and giving toys to needy children, raising money for Haiti earthquake victims, participating in local park cleanups, organizing bone marrow and blood drives and donating to fight hunger, cancer, blindness, homelessness and Alzheimer's.

"None of my students come here just to learn to fight," said Gould, founder and chief instructor, while touring the 2,500 square-foot martial arts facility, or dojo, on Everett Street in Allston. "Ultimately, that is a byproduct of what we do here."

"I think it's very important that as martial artists we engage the community and world outside this space in a positive way," he said, adding later that, "We don't just teach karate here, we teach character ... We take our art seriously, but we also take the non-physical aspect just as seriously."

As far as he is aware, he said none of his students have been in a physical altercation since joining the program, because the training is designed to teach peaceful conflict resolution.

"The great irony about martial arts is the last thing the world needs is someone who is good at kicking and punching," Gould said.

Instead, he said his teaching is designed to give students an arsenal of self-defense tools, and as a last-resort "weapon" in that arsenal is their physical training.

Students make friends in the community through their community outreach and service; they learn proper diet and nutrition; Gould teaches students awareness, order, patience, how to control anger and how to exude confidence, backed up by their training, through body language and eye contact – all of which are forms of self-defense, he said.

"Displaying confidence is often enough to resolve a conflict," Gould said. "Body language and eye contact can be as powerful a form of defense as a sharp kick in the groin. But, if that doesn't work, I want them to know how to fight and defend themselves physically."

The 39-year-old Sensei Gould began training in karate at a studio in Sharon, where grew up, when he was around 6-years-old.

Yet, through over three decades of practice, "I personally feel like I'm just starting to get it," he said, adding that he tells his students that reaching black-belt status – a five- to six-year-long process of constant practice – is the start of their training.

"It's a lifelong study," he said.

The Boston University alum, father of two, husband and former Marine Corps officer whose day job is in publishing said he now runs the Emerald Necklace studio not only because he has a passion for the Japanese artistic fighting style, but also as a show of gratitude to the martial arts instructors that taught him, who he says have become like family members.

When he moved eight years ago from Mission Hill back to Allston, where he lived during college, Gould started his martial arts business about a year later in October 2003 and has worked to steadily recruit more student members since.

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His students first trained in the West End House Boys & Girls Club before they moved to their own space in a cramped, 800-square-foot suite in a building behind its current standalone facility – a former auto body repair shop that Gould converted into a dojo that provided more than three times as much room to train.

“We’ve come a very long way,” he said.

“It would be wonderful to get this to the point of membership- and financial- stability so this could become my day job,” said Gould, who also teaches women’s self-defense classes, volunteers to talk to area students, parents and teachers about bullying and runs a [self-defense resource blog](#). “But, I want to build a dojo in a sustainable way, not in a rushed way to just sign up more members.”

Along the dojo’s calmly colored walls are hanging Japanese symbols and other decorative art pieces. Equipment, including traditional Japanese weaponry surround the gray, padded training mat, which accounts for the majority of the building’s floor space. The mat is where students practice karate in two- to three-hour sessions, which begin and end with a reflection and meditation period, two to three times each week.

Photos and other reminders of past community service projects are also displayed, and one corner is a library with over 300 books on the martial arts and related subjects. Aside from learning physical self defense and working on community service projects, students are assigned homework, “not college- level course work, but it’s designed to make them think,” said Gould.

“Students here don’t just have a physical experience, but an academic experience as well,” he said.

Unlike most martial arts studios that begin by offering youth programs, Emerald Necklace began with adult classes – ages 14 and up – and currently has around 45 adult members, including nine who have earned a black belt. The studio began offering Lil’ Dragon courses for children ages 4 to 8 last year, and added another youth program this year for those aged 9 to 13.

His membership is “phenomenally” diverse, he said.

Students in the adult classes, from age 14 to over 50, come from every corner of Boston and as far as Natick, said Gould. They range in terms of gender – around 65 percent are women, religious and ethnic background, physical capability, training background and height – as short as 4’11” and as tall as 6’5”, he said.

But, the differences vanish on the training floor, where everyone is trained to have the humble mentality of a beginner.

Of the nine black belt students, five graduated two weeks ago.

“It was an amazing experience because I can remember each one of their first classes,” said Gould, who over the course of about one hour told numerous stories about his students, mentioning them by first name without having to pause to remember.





Watching the late-October graduation ceremony had seemed like the ultimate level of satisfaction for Gould as a teacher – until the next morning.

“I just gave out black belts the day before ... those students have grown and developed, and less than 24 hours later I had a student walk in who knew nothing. It was just a great, indescribable feeling for me.”

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