



Karate classes taught by grizzled ex-juvenile delinquent have impact

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MASCOUTAH • He walks with a cane, hobbled by a bad right leg. His three bouts with cancer have zapped a good chunk of his energy. He wears hearing aids and glasses. He seems out of place in the karate class.

Especially as the instructor.

That is, until a little time is spent in the dojo of Steven "JD" Hill. Twice a week, the auditorium at Leu Civic Center becomes Hill's domain. This is where students of all ages and skill levels surrender to Hill's teachings. Students with physical and developmental disabilities are among those Hill encourages to participate — those who might not be welcome in other organized activities, considered too high risk or too much work.

Hunter Haines is in the class for a confidence boost.

"He cares about everyone who walks in," said Hunter, 11. "He just takes them in and helps them. He's a wonderful guy."

Hunter said Hill's advice about a school bully has been just as valuable as the self-defense skills he is learning.

"Just say how you feel, then ignore him," said Hunter, repeating what Hill had told him. "Then when he talks to you, be nice and eventually he will see what he says doesn't hurt you anymore."

Hunter says it worked.

Kaevon Nikpouri, 12, said the karate classes he and his brother, Amir, 11, have been taking for the past year or so have helped them get better grades.

"Me and my brother used to be those people who never listened," Kaevon said. Hill has taught them how important that skill is if they want to learn martial arts. In turn, listening has proved valuable in the classroom.

Thanks to Hill, "I'm getting straight A's and B's at school," Kaevon said.

Hill's commitment to help kids who some consider different comes from his own challenges growing up in foster care in New York state. He moved constantly, including attending eight high schools. Never did he feel like he belonged.

"There was no friends," said Hill, 57.

When he was 9, Hill stopped in a nearby martial arts studio in New York City. He offered to clean in exchange for paying judo class fees. Even though he moved several times, Hill was able to find martial arts studios along the way. The classes were his anchor when the rest of his world was adrift. He eventually began teaching, a certified black belt in three disciplines.

After high school, Hill went into the Army. Serving in Vietnam, he was shot in the leg, which led to decades of health issues. Knee replacement surgery has caused circulation problems. Doctors say they might have to amputate.

Hill met his wife in Florida, where he was living after a medical discharge from the military and where she was stationed in the Air Force. She was transferred often, eventually ending up at Scott Air Force Base. The couple divorced about a decade ago and have four grown children.

At Scott, Hill got involved in martial arts classes. It was the early 1990s. When an instructor left the youth center, Hill agreed to fill in. When program director Patty Peek left in 1998 to head Leu Civic Center, a United Way agency, she asked Hill to come along.

"He never gives up on any child," Peek said. "Some of these kids don't have one supportive person believing in them. Everyone needs someone to believe in them. As a child, he had a tough time and knows a lot of these kids are in the same

way. Some days are hard, extremely difficult for him. But he never lets on and never gives up. And that's what he brings to the children — to never give up. Life isn't always going to be fair."

Kate Elder said her daughter, Kelsey, 12, has become more confident as a result of Hill's class.

Hill strikes a balance between stern and nurturing that the kids respond to, she said.

"He helps them better themselves with self-esteem," Elder said. "And with that, they always do better."

Hill said everyone should be given a chance to find out who they really are. But many organized activities through schools don't allow for that.

"All these guys love being in here," Hill said. "Some have creative qualities we have to work with."

Those include one boy who has obsessive-compulsive disorder and another who is hyperactive.

"I told his mom: 'Don't give him his medicine. I want to see that hyperactiveness.'"

Everyone knows Hill as JD. It's a name he picked up as a kid for his frequent run-ins with the law. It stands for juvenile delinquent. The name stuck.

"I was not a perfect kid, needless to say," Hill said. "I didn't run with gangs and didn't do drugs. But I did get into a lot of fights."

The class Hill teaches is \$30 a month. Students who cannot afford the fee are given scholarships. If they cannot afford a uniform, Hill provides one in exchange for doing chores in the dojo.

"It teaches them how to work for what they get," Hill says.

That's something with which Hill is familiar.