Instructing all ages in self defense and more

By Daniel Groner

For Dr. Clifford Thomas, martial arts teaches not just self defense, but a way of life.

Thomas, 52, has studied both judo and tae kwon do since an early age, garnering awards, recognition and even black belt status. But his greatest honor, he says, stems from working with others — from school children to seniors — to show them how martial arts can improve their lives.

In 1980, he founded his own self-defense school called Tae Kwon Do Ramblers Self-Defense Systems: We Lead by Example. Since then, Thomas — who is an environmental engineer by day — has spent his afternoons and evenings teaching over 5,000 students of different ages and skill levels.

Addressing the needs of youth

The school was designed to provide after-school programming for disadvantaged youth. Thomas, a native Washingtonian who now resides in Suitland, Md., recognized that many children in the area could benefit from his martial arts program.

In addition to self defense and self discipline, his school addresses other topics relevant to youth, such as anger management and resisting peer pressure.

He also speaks about timely issues, such as protection against child molestations, child snatching, date rape and computer predators. Whatever the case may be, Thomas hopes to teach how a martial artist would react to confrontation.

To stay in his program, Thomas requires his students to supply recent report cards, as well as a list of chores they have performed around the house. In this way, he stays updated on the children's lives, both inside and outside his class.

In addition, his organization solicits scholarship money to help send some of the class's graduates to trade schools if they can't afford to go otherwise.

Street smarts for seniors

Over time, Thomas also came to realize that children weren't the only ones in need of the lessons to be learned from the practice of martial arts.

So Thomas decided to start a program titled "Street Smarts: Saving the Seniors" to keep older adults safe on the streets, in their cars, and in their homes.

He has created a methodology specifically for seniors and those with disabilities. It encourages them to use whatever resources they have to their advantage.

For example, he shows how one can use a cane or a walker to help fend off an attacker. Thomas also teaches his class techniques to escape from choke holds, and the areas on an attacker's body to target while fighting back.

"We don't teach violence," Thomas explained. "Self-defense takes place before an attack happens. We teach people how to protect themselves."

In that vein, Thomas goes beyond physical self defense with his Street Smarts class and teaches his older students how to avoid common scams and other risks as well. "When I saw seniors being robbed, swindled and scammed, I realized I needed to put a program together for them."

Thomas leads situational skills and shows short films to demonstrate how scam artists pick their prey. The knowledge of martial arts, he says, can help navigate ways to avoid dicey situations altogether, as well as to think quickly on one's feet when trying to escape from a con.

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Because he deems this information essential to people as they age and become increasingly more vulnerable, Thomas offers his classes at senior and community centers, retirement communities and apartment buildings around the area. Many classes are free of charge.

The next free “Saving the Seniors” program will be on Friday, March 9 at 7 p.m. at Victory Tower Apartments, 7031 Carroll Ave., Takoma Park, Md. To learn more, call Jackie Davison at (301) 277-1727.

An eight-week class will start on Monday, March 12 at the Bladensburg Community Center. The fee for the beginner’s session is $40; for the advanced session, it’s $45. The center is located at 4500 57th Ave., Bladensburg, Md. To register, call (301) 277-2124.

Thomas will also lead a free monthly martial arts class starting in May at the Margaret Schweinhaut Senior Center in Silver Spring, Md. To learn more, call (301) 681-1255.

For more information about the Rammers after-school self-defense program, or to make a contribution, go to www.ramblers-tkd.org or call (202) 251-1030.

Dr. Clifford Thomas demonstrates a self-defense move with Gregory Clement at the Bladensburg Community Center while his wife, Thalia Simpson-Clement watches. Thomas runs an after-school martial arts program, and offers safety classes for older adults.