

# High kicking

## Karate class boosts students' self-esteem

BY RENÉE SKOGLUND  
STAFF WRITER  
rskoglund@ecce.com

"KIAI!" yell the members of Todd Caccamo's Saturday afternoon karate class at All-Star Karate Family Center in Westland.

The cry, which sounds like "key-eye," is projected with as much energy and force as Tarzan having wrestled an alligator and won. It comes from the gut. It comes from the heart. And maybe it's all the more meaningful because the eight students in Caccamo's class are mentally challenged. Most live in group homes, under the auspices of Community Living Services in Wayne.

"Are you ready to do some karate?" Caccamo asks the class. "Today is testing day."

The class needs no reminders. For the past eight weeks, the students, who range in age from the late 20s to early 50s, have been challenged to listen, follow directions and demonstrate the moves necessary to earn a yellow belt, which represents the first level of martial arts mastery. They've also learned how to respect each other and work as a team. They may need a little help with most moves, but they're ready to show off what they've learned.

Caccamo, a black belt martial arts instructor with 23 years of martial arts experience, asks for volunteers to demonstrate specific

moves. The class begins with palm pushes. Erlene Davis of Inkster steps forward.

"One, two, three, four," says Caccamo, pushing out his palms in staccato succession. Davis does her best to imitate. "Good job," says Caccamo. Praise, when earned, builds confidence.

Student Craig Kuish of Westland really wants to kick rather than palm-push. It's obvious he's ready to engage in a battle of the wills. After gentle convincing fails to work, Caccamo takes a different tact and lets Craig do a few kicks. Craig beams.

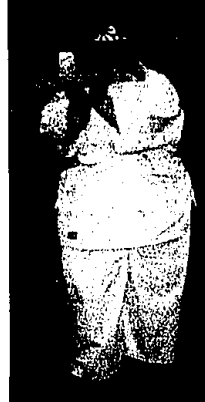
"Maybe I just misunderstood," explains Caccamo to the class. He knows that sparing a student embarrassment saves face and preserves dignity.

The students who began class eight weeks ago aren't the same students who are about to wrap bright yellow belts around their waists. As their confidence and physical dexterity increased, their attitude changed. They may not be able to roll with all the punches, but they're less hesitant to show off their moves.

"If we would have asked those people to come up eight weeks ago and demonstrate moves, no way would they have done it," says Caccamo. "We've put them in leadership roles. It's not a fake self-confidence. It's a true confidence."



**Dexterity:** Craig Kuish of Westland (left) demonstrates the kicking maneuver he learned in instructor Todd Caccamo's karate class.



**Pride:** Jayanne McDougald of Westland displays her yellow belt. "Her face always says 'thank you,' and that's all we instructors want," says Todd Caccamo, instructor at All-Star Karate Family Center in Westland.

### Progress

Caccamo volunteers his time at the All-Star Karate Center. During the week, he works as a full-time program manager for the Gates Rubber Company in Rochester Hills. He became involved in the class after he met the husband of Scherie Kurkie, a Community Living Services social worker.

"The martial arts philosophy is you always help those who need it. I've always had a soft spot for the mentally challenged," he says. Kurkie, the social worker who helps Davis remain as independent as possible, has seen positive changes in the students and in her client.

"You could tell that they didn't have someone pay so much attention to them on an individual basis before. For Erlene, I saw her really enjoying the physical exercises. At first her balance was off a bit, but with practice and stretching, she's improved."

Two other instructors volunteer their time with Caccamo, Chris Dillon of Dearborn Heights and Erik Mullinix of Wayne, who works full time with learning disabled and emotionally impaired students at Franklin Middle School in Wayne.

"I've noticed a progression where they are listening more, paying more attention," says Mullinix of his karate students. "In the beginning they were more off task, but now they're really progressing. It's a gradual progression, but it's happening."

### Award time

After the students complete their final move — a body roll down a football field-size mat —

they line up in front of Caccamo. One by one he calls them up and presents them with a certificate and a yellow belt. Some students want to hug Caccamo, but there's no hugging allowed. This is a solemn occasion that demands the respect of a hand shake or a bow. The students comply.

"You guys now have something no one can take away from you," he says after the last certificate and belt has been handed out. "It shows respect, and it shows that you've helped your teammates. You guys are now official karate students."

Victor Sullivan of Westland shows off his certificate and collects congratulations. Along with his certificate and yellow belt, he has something he didn't have eight weeks ago — the self-confidence of a karate student who's completed a task and done it well.

All-Star Karate Family Center is located at 34752 Warren Road, Westland. Call (734) 513-5127. Todd Caccamo, who currently is on a business trip to Japan, plans to teach another class to the mentally challenged this summer.



The right stuff: Instructor Erik Mullinix (second from left) helps student assume just the right stance in karate class. The class of mentally challenged adults, six men and two women, earned their yellow belts and good dose of confidence.

### SINGLES MINGLE

If you want to submit an item for the Singles Mingle calendar, fax it to our Farmington office (248) 477-9722 or Livonia office (734) 594-7273 or write: Singles Mingle, Farmington Observer, 33411 Grand River, Farmington, MI 48335. The deadline for an announcement to appear in the Thursday edition is noon Friday.

#### SINGLE MINGLES

Single Mingle dances are held selected Fridays throughout the month. For dates and locations, call the Metropolitan Single Professionals at (248) 851-9909.

#### BOOK TALK

Borders Books in Farmington Hills hosts a book discussion group 7:30-8:30 p.m. the second Wednesday of each month. Call (248) 851-9909.

#### CARDS & DINNER

Join the Farmington Single Professionals for euchre, pinocle and dinner from 6:30-9:30 p.m. every Monday at Crowley's Old Village Inn in downtown Farmington.

#### AFTER PARTY PARTIES

Metropolitan Single Professionals host "Fun and Fine Dining" 5:30-7:30 p.m. every Thursday at restaurants throughout the Detroit area. To find out locations, call (248) 851-9909. Other activities include:

■ Dances held 8 p.m.-1 p.m., every Friday through May 3 throughout the Detroit area. Admission is \$5 members, \$8 non-members. Call (248) 851-

9909 or visit [www.mspsc.com](http://www.mspsc.com)  
■ Euchre 6:30-9:30 p.m., every Monday through April at Crowley's Old Village Inn, 33338 Grand River Ave., east of Farmington Road, Farmington. \$5 for members, \$6 for non-members.

#### DIVORCE SUPPORT

The Women's Resource Center at Schoolcraft College sponsors a Divorce Support Group from 7-9 p.m. at the McDowell Center (room 225). Call (734) 462-4443. Group meets the second (discussion) and fourth (speaker) Tuesday of the month. Upcoming schedule includes:

■ New group for those divorced more than one year. Meets from 7:30-9 p.m. across the hall from WRC, April 11.

#### WARD SINGLES

Single Point Ministries of Ward Presbyterian Church (30 years and older) meet at 11:30 a.m. every Sunday in Knox Hall, for fellowship and encouragement. Ward is located at 40000 Six Mile Road in Northville. Call (248) 374-6920. Other Ward Singles events:

■ Lighthouse Cafe, 7-10 p.m. Friday, March 29. Cost is \$5. Hot dogs and other goodies available.

#### SINGLES WALK

Singles from First Presbyterian Church in Northville walk through Heritage Park in Farmington Hills at 10 a.m. every Saturday.

### Clarification



**Troop Members:** Members of Boy Scout Troop 110's color guard were incorrectly identified in a previous Observer issue. The correct troop members are Jay Gronback (left), Matt Erlich, Billy Hübner and Todd Maki. The troop recently celebrated its 50th anniversary.

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