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BRADENTONHERALD.COM

Wednesday, May 13, 2009

Posted on Tue, May. 12, 2009

Karate Chops

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On the surface, circumstances seemed to make a life-long wish impossible.

Jason Sasser's cerebral palsy and bad arm have left him wheelchair-bound and ruled him out as ever being able to learn karate.

Or so he was told.

The Crossiett, Ark., resident had been searching for an instructor to teach him the sport for more than 20 years. Then, about a year ago — thanks to an Internet search — Sasser found 11-time world champion karate master Donna Judge in Sarasota.

She gave him a chance, opening an unexpected window of health and mental benefits that changed the 36-year-old's life.

Judge is the developer of Handi-capable Karate.

"This isn't something that's going to teach you how to kick and punch," Judge, 53, said of the video course she developed after meeting Sasser. "It's going to give you a way of life. A very respectful way of life."

Judge is an eighth-degree black belt who has been training for 35 years. Her Handi-capable Karate program is a modified version of karate for the upper body that can be performed by those less agile.

"I'm not a physical therapist or anything, but I've seen what it's done for Jason and I know what it does for everybody regardless of whether or not they're in a wheelchair," said Judge, who is also a security aide at Sarasota High School.

She'd like to get her specialized sport into the Paralympic Games and reach out to other segments of the population with it, including injured war veterans and senior citizens.

Before meeting Sasser, Judge never really thought about teaching karate to those like him. But when she visited Sasser in Arkansas, she was amazed at how much he took away from her initial instruction. She promised to send him lessons on video. The amateur videos, which provided the framework for her DVD series, taught the basics.

Sasser would call Judge often with details of his progress. Soon, the phone calls revealed unexpected surprises.

One day, he called to tell her he was covered in pickle juice.

"He said, 'For the first time in my life I was able to open a pickle jar,' " Judge said.

The next week, there was another call. This time he opened a bottle of soda for the first time.

His arm was gaining strength and coordination. And the mental benefits provided self-confidence, patience and inner peace.

"It's just made a lot of wonderful things happen for him," said Judge. Sasser, a sports radio show host

who also works as a Wal-mart greeter, has been thrilled to learn karate.

He's been mesmerized by the craft since he was about 12 years old, when he saw a Miss USA contestant perform it as a talent. She broke bricks with her feet and walked on broken glass, Sasser said.

He pictured himself doing karate in some form one day.

But no one wanted to teach him. They said it couldn't be done. Even his family members were skeptical, he said.

Sasser kept searching for someone who could help. Someone who could see beyond his impairments.

"Karate really saved my life," he said during a phone interview from Arkansas. "It kept me focused, it kept me motivated. It gave me a chance to go somewhere in my body and in my mind — someplace physically that my body could not go."

The white belt student is in training for his yellow belt.

Sasser is seen briefly in Judge's promotional video for Handi-capable Karate.

In it, Judge and several other students sit in wheelchairs performing the movements, which are based on Okinowan Karate. Sitting in a wheelchair helped Judge tweak her program to suit participants.

There are no kicks or stances in Handi-capable Karate. Just combinations of arm and hand movements that can be easily performed in a chair.

Judge is still filming the video program. The DVDs teach up to a black belt. The white belt DVD is available for purchase for \$59.99 at handi-capablekarate.com. It holds three months worth of lessons for earning a white belt.

Earning a black belt takes about three years in the program, Judge said.

It takes five years for an able-bodied person to earn one.

The DVD has weekly lessons and includes a manual. Once the lessons are completed, a test is required to graduate to the next level. Tests must be videotaped and mailed to Judge for review.

The test is comprised of a performance section and a written section, filled with identifying karate terms and questions about the code of honor.

For Sasser, the program has given him wings to fly.

It has taught him that anything is possible.

"You never give up on a dream — no matter how small, how little or how stupid it seems," he said. "You just don't give up on it."

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