

Typical classes at Universal Taekwondo Academy

Bustling with excitement, enthusiasm, entertainment

By Heather Newberry

Have you ever gone for a stroll, passed by a building, and heard children yelling, learning, and laughing? No? Well, have you ever peeked through a window and seen people walking around in odd looking clothing, flying through the air, and hurling others to the ground? No? I guess you've never walked by Universal Taekwondo Academy in Bethel. Don't be fooled, more than what meets the eye is going on inside this building.

Most people probably wonder what compels people to become involved in taekwondo. Seven year old Brennan Gilmore said he joined because it looked like fun.

"I saw people on TV doing taekwondo and learning to defend myself sounded like fun, so I asked if I could do it. Lots of other people in the class joined because of the same reasons as I did," he said.

With students ranging from age four to ages they won't admit to, Universal Taekwondo Academy is always bustling with activities.

"In the children's class, which is mainly for students below age 12, we try to come up with creative activities that will hold the kids' interest and also teach them proper techniques. One of the favorite activities of the students in the obstacle courses we set up. We put a variety of things in the kids' way and in order to get around them they must perform a certain stance, kick, punch, or jump," said red/black belt Chris Baker.

Most of the children agreed that this activity is their favorite.

"It's fun practicing different jumps and techniques, but it's even more

fun when we race through the obstacle courses. I like when we play music while we doing it too," said ten year old purple belt Brianna Baker.

However, a dojo, or school where martial arts are taught, can't focus only on the fun stuff. The majority of the classes contain vigorous exercises to keep the students in shape and to build muscle.

"We start off every class with a warm up, which includes exercises such as stretching, jumping jacks, push ups, basic punches, basic kicks, and focusing on getting into low stances. Then, in some classes we break into stations. At each station, we focus on each student's weakness and help them with it. A common weakness among the students is not putting enough power in their punches. To improve this,

we put the student in front of a punching bag and explain what they need to do. Then, we demonstrate what they should do, such as snapping their hips more to make their punches snap," said Baker.

Students said they agreed that stations are helpful.

"Most of the time I have to work on my front kick at stations. I'm always off balance after my kick because I don't put my leg down fast enough. Stations have really helped all of my kicks get better," said nine year old orange belt Jesse Troy.

Master instructor Steve Dahlheimer explained that for each belt there are different requirements.

"Obviously, the requirements get more demanding and take

longer to achieve as a person advances through the belts. For each belt there's a kata, which is a pattern for defending oneself against several attackers, and self defense, which is a flexible way to defend oneself against a certain technique. When it comes time for people to test for their black belt, they test on new material designed specifically for that level along with material they learned at previous belts," he said.

As students become older and begins to progress more quickly, they may transfer to the adult class. The adult classes, typically for students about age 12, are structured similarly to the children's classes.

"The warm up for both classes is the same. But in the adult class we tend to focus on self defense," said Baker. "Most of the time we work on the self defense required for our belt. This is the self defense in which we perform techniques planned out by master Dahlheimer. For my current belt, I have ten different techniques I have to do. One of the techniques is getting out of a two hand choke. This technique is one of the more simple ones. All I do is perform a wrist break as I swipe the attacker's leg out from under him or her," explained Baker.

An activity that occurs far more often in the adult class than in the children's class is sparring. Sparring is basically bowing but with, for the most part, lighter attacks.

"We don't spar very much in the children's class because the kids don't have enough control and it's too easy for someone to get hurt.

When we work on sparring in the children's class I have the children work on simpler techniques, such as having one person throw a punch and have the other person block," said Dahlheimer.

Every student in the adult class said sparring is an enjoyable activity.

"Not only is it fun, it is also a learning experience. When I spar, I pay attention to each thing I'm doing wrong. Such as missing the block every time my opponent throws a hook kick with their left foot. After I spar I always have a better idea of what I need to work on," said second degree black belt Bret Wiseman.

Having fun is one of the top priorities at this dojo.

"It's impor-



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