



Prescott dojo teaches martial art of 'self-development'

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They come from all walks of life – brick mason ... high-school teacher ... title research – but they all enjoy a unique connection through a lesser-known martial art that emphasizes energy and motion.

"It's total mind and body coordination," said Bob Ward, who has been teaching Aikido in Prescott for the past decade. "We say we focus more on self-development than self-defense."

Those interested in mainstream martial arts may not find Aikido especially to their liking. Depictions of such activities often feature a violent confrontation of some sort. Ward's students avoid those situations.

"The best martial art is to not be involved," eighth-year student Sandra Parker said about violence, a belief echoed by other students and preached by Aikido's founder, Morihei Ueshiba.

"We ceaselessly pray that fights do not occur," Ueshiba, often referred to as O Sensei, is quoted as saying. "For this reason, we strictly prohibit matches in Aikido. Aikido's spirit is that of loving attack and that of peaceful reconciliation."

Teaching out of his pink dojo in the 100 block of Summit Avenue in Prescott, Ward currently has eight students. Over the years, hundreds of people interested in Aikido have passed through his doors, including many college students.

"It's become very popular; it's a fairly modern martial art," said Ward, who has practiced Aikido since 1979. "It teaches people how to get out of the way of an attack. The concepts of Aikido are being used in psychology as conflict resolution concepts."

Unlike many other forms of martial arts, there are no competitions or tournaments. And colored belts are not awarded.

Ward said some students have had a difficult time accepting Aikido's mission, wanting immediate gratification along with punching and kicking.

"Some people start out that way ... it teaches people to get in touch with what they can do," he said. "Aikido is something you can't do in the first night. The experience changes as you go on. You change who you are."

Ward's students can share stories of how their lives have changed. Jay Krienitz credits Aikido for helping him escape serious injury from a snowboarding accident, going into a safe roll. Leigh Marshall credits Aikido as giving her renewed energy when she plays the piano.

"It's taught me so many different things," said Amy Golden, a second-year student. "It's changed who I am ... physically and mentally. Just since I've been here, it's changed me so much."

In simple terms, Aikido was developed by Ueshiba as an art utilizing one's own energy to gain control of opponents, placing emphasis on motion and the dynamics of movement. On a physical level, it involves some throws and joint locks that are derived from Jujitsu. Some throws and other

techniques derived from Kenjutsu.

Ward said his female students often “get it” a little quicker than their male counterparts.

“They don’t rely on strength,” Ward said. “We want to use the subtle energy or alignment of the body rather than strength.”

Ward’s classes do not include youngsters. In fact, all of his students in last week’s Thursday evening class were over age 30. It’s a martial art that can be practiced at any age, however, as Ward found out when he was once thrown to the mat by a 92-year-old man.

During eight years of training in his current dojo, called Aikido of Prescott, Ward said there has never been an injury. He credits that to a “lot of good stretching” along with students working up level by level at their own pace.

Students had plenty of good things to report about Ward’s teaching methods, Parker saying “a lot of our success due to Bob ... he’s very kind-hearted.”

“We’re lucky here, lucky because nobody’s out to harm you here,” Golden said about the program. “It’s a good group of people.”

Krienitz said Ward’s dojo creates an atmosphere where both respect and technique are paramount, not necessarily the case in other Aikido classes.

“I hope that the technique is getting better all the time,” Ward said. “And I hope it’s a place where it’s fun and when they leave, they feel better than when they got here.”

Wrapping up a Thursday evening class, students did appear to possess plenty of energy.

“It’s the first time I’ve done anything remotely this physical,” said Golden, an avid hiker. “It’s been a real mind-opener for me. There’s nothing else to compare it to, the way I move.”

Student Paul Randall has studied other forms of martial arts, including judo and karate. Randall said his Aikido training creates a different type of energy and brings out the best in each person’s abilities. “You grow at the level you should,” he said.

Marshall said the energy “emanates” from participants and that intensity affects other people.

Krienitz expressed a desire to be a lifetime practitioner of Aikido, but with an upcoming move to the upper Midwest, that may not be possible.

“The toughest thing I think, realistically, is there are no other dojos,” Krienitz said, referring to where he will be moving in Minnesota. “If I stopped doing Aikido, it would be a huge shame.”

Ward always invites people from the area to learn about Aikido and its benefits. But he knows it has to be a right fit and new students must have patience.

“I’m always looking for new people, although such a small percentage end up staying,” he said. “It’s not flashy. It’s something very personal. Most don’t hang around long enough to get the benefit.”

For those who may have an interest in Aikido or for class information, Ward can be contacted at 445-1159 or e-mailed at bob@aikidoofprescott.org.