

Seeing is Believing: Local Martial Arts Center Pioneers Sign Language Classes

By Brenda Darnley Martin

When Tampa resident Robert Young decided he wanted to learn the Japanese defensive martial art of Aikido, he was a bit apprehensive that it might not be possible since he is hard of hearing and Aikido is performed by responding to oral commands which are given in Japanese. But Robert wasn't going to give up without a fight, so he asked a local Aikido dojo (training facility) to create a special class utilizing American Sign Language (ASL).

Luckily for Robert, he called the Florida Aikido Center in Drew Park (www.flaikidocenter.com), which is owned and operated by Sensei Gina Boccolucci. While Gina did not know ASL, she had learned to spell in sign language as a child and was more than willing to work with Robert.

That was two years ago. They began by working together one-on-one; Gina developing signs for the different Aikido self-defense techniques and Robert gaining the confidence to join in the dojo's regular classes. "At first, I had a hard time realizing what I needed to do to communicate, but Robert had a strong commitment and waited patiently for me to figure it out," Gina stated. "It was an enriching experience, so I've decided to make a specific program of it."

The ASL classes began on February 6 and so far there are two other regulars besides Robert: Nancy Wyman and Helen Kansky. Nancy is new to the Tampa area, having relocated here from Kalamazoo, Michigan. She has acclimated quickly - in just two months she found a roommate, signed up for the Aikido classes and landed a job! When asked what she likes about the classes, she replied: "I enjoy the opportunity to exercise and to meet new people." She recruited her roommate Helen Kansky to attend with her. Helen also enjoys practicing the art of Aikido.

Robert, who works repairing cars and is a married father of two children, makes the classes a family affair, frequently bringing his wife, Yari, and children, Evie and Alex, along to watch. He loves the classes, stating: "(A)kido is a great stress reliever and has improved my outlook on life."

Besides the ASL class, the Florida Aikido Center offers classes for adults and children. Boccolucci is aware that due to transportation and other issues, she might not have the chance to teach the ASL or younger students each week, so: "...my primary focus is to make sure that they all leave having learned at least one thing that will help them with self defense."

The Florida Aikido Center's ASL program is offered Sunday afternoons from 12:15 to 1:30. Tuition is free to all ASL students and their families through August 31st.