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NEIGHBORHOODNEWS

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DR. CLIFFORD THOMAS

Pied piper of martial arts keeps giving back

BY MICHELLE PHIPPS-EVANS

When it comes to giving back to the community, Dr. Clifford Thomas is extraordinary. Despite his high profile and stellar accomplishments, the 52-year-old black belt martial artist has been active in the community using his skills to teach everyone, old and young. He has found a unique way of combining the various martial arts that he teaches to young people and seniors with skills that come in handy every day. He does not just offer pure self-defense classes, but he relates them to other facets of one's life.

"I've done a lot of things for seniors and children," says Thomas about the kinds of programs he offers at his self-defense school, Tae Kwon Do Ramblers Self-Defense Systems: We Lead by Example. "One thing is, when you get older, you get vulnerable. Seniors need to know how to protect themselves as they are preyed on by everybody." Therefore, the born and bred Washingtonian, who lives in southeast, offers a program called Street Smarts: Saving the Seniors, where they are educated about protecting themselves, their homes and their vehicles. They are taught what to look for on the street and how to defend themselves, and how to protect themselves from those who try to take advantage of them, even from scam artists.

Likewise, for youngsters, Tae Kwon Do Ramblers offers a child snatching prevention class, a peer pressure resistance class, an anger management class and a child molestation prevention class, among others.

"Lots of kids don't have discipline at home and martial arts give them direction," Thomas explains. "We teach them to be leaders and not followers, about honoring their mothers and fathers, doing chores around the home and getting homework done. We're different in that we ask for report cards." The Ramblers is a holistic program that teaches its students the art of self-defense, as well as discipline, safety, self-esteem, health, fitness and more. Its mission, according to its Web site, is to develop confident, successful leaders by promoting personal safety and security, as well as to build high moral standards that reflect acceptance and respect for all cultures.

Founded by Thomas in 1980, the Ramblers organization reflects the diversity of the community, including persons with developmental and physical disabilities such as Down syndrome, attention deficit disorder and deafness. He teaches

martial arts philosophy and skills, including practical self-defense. All ages are represented in the organization, from children as young as three to senior citizens. Thomas holds his DC programs at the Kenilworth-Parkside Recreation Center in Ward 7, but he spends much of his time teaching self-defense classes at the Bladensburg and the West Lanham community centers in Maryland.

One person who attends the Bladensburg class on Wednesdays is Susan McCutchen, who started doing martial arts with the Ramblers in the summer of 2003 after taking her son, who is now in college, when he was 13 years old. She is now at the intermediate level and can still hardly believe that she has reached so far.

"When I started, I had no athletic skills but now I've become much more confident when I walk down the street, I'm more observant," says McCutchen, 51, who has done the Saving Seniors program. "You learn how to do simple things with a walker or a cane." But even beyond teaching martial arts, McCutchen adds that Thomas "brings something to the community. It's good to see somebody who's interested in giving something positive to the community. He's affordable, and he has positive programs, which he gears toward people's abilities. I know I cannot jump around, but I can do forms. And I can defend myself."

Thomas, who holds five doctorate degrees in martial arts from Oxford University; Pennsylvania State University; the World Martial Arts Hall of Fame in Baltimore, Md.; Germany and Saudi Arabia, began studying and training in martial arts in 1964, starting with the art of judo. He has black belts in five different martial arts styles, and he has trained more than 5,000 students in the Washington, DC, area. He spends countless hours volunteering in neighborhoods challenged by drug problems and violence. He leads by example, working to foster community involvement and an appreciation for different cultures and belief systems, while promoting strong educational goals and work ethics for young people. He devotes his considerable martial arts skills and energy to the betterment of communities that found it difficult to accept his disciplined program in the beginning.

Besides all this, Thomas—who also holds a bachelor's degree in mechanical engineering design and associate's degrees in environmental research—works full time as an environmental engineer and teacher. Thomas serves as a member of several boards of directors of Halls of Fame world-

wide. Among his accomplishments, he was named head coach of Amateur Athletic Union (AAU) Potomac Valley Team, which was the first to win the Olympic competition in martial arts for the Potomac Valley region in 1989. The team eventually won six world championships, and Thomas said he paved the way for martial artists in this region to be invited to the Olympics. He received the Diamond Life Achievement Award from the World Martial Arts Hall of Fame in 1998. He received the Unsung Hero Award from the District of Columbia and the Presidential Award from President George W. Bush and First Lady Laura Bush in 2001. It was then that he was referred to as "the Pied Piper of martial arts for children." He was also honored as one of the few non-Asian Americans to receive rank under General Choi of Korea and to receive rank from the World Korean Martial Arts Union in 2002. This year, he received certificates of appreciation from the Maryland-National Capital Park and Planning Commission and from the City Council of Camden, N.J.

With all these stellar accomplishments, Thomas still felt it was important to give back to the problem neighborhoods. Thomas says that martial arts taught him to be a leader and not a follower, and he wanted to bring it back to the community to share what he learned.

Thomas wants to be clear about what he does. He is careful to add, "I don't teach violence. I teach kids how to defend themselves, how to fight child molesters or how to handle anger. I teach battered women how to protect themselves. That's the core of what we do."

For more information, contact the Tae Kwan Do Ramblers at 202-251-1030, visit their web site at www.tkdrambblers.org or e-mail tkdrambblers@yahoo.com. ■



Dr. Clifford Thomas is called the "Pied Piper of martial arts for children."



Capital Community News announces its
**FIRST ANNUAL
 BEST AMATEUR
 GARDEN CONTEST.**

Attention all gardening aficionados in ward 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7 & 8. It is time to show off your garden to the Washington area. Contest is open to all amateur gardeners in DC.

The rules for entry are:

- 1) An amateur must maintain Garden.
- 2) Owners, friends, or neighbors may nominate gardens.
- 3) Your entry should include up to two pictures that represent the garden; and sent to carolina@hillrag.com; or mailed to Capital Community News, 224 7th St., SE, Suite 300. Please include your name, address, email and phone. All entries must be received by Tuesday, August 15, 2006.
- 4) The judges will use the photographs to select five finalists. They will then visit the finalists' gardens to choose the top three.
- 5) Finalists' gardens will be profiled in September's Homes & Gardens Issues of *DC North, East of the River* and the *Hill Rag*. They also will receive a prize.
- 6) All materials submitted become the property of Capital Community News

Prizes are:
1st place: A one-year maintenance agreement (\$1000 value) with **Thomas Landscapes**

2nd place: \$250 Gift Certificate from **Frager's Hardware**

3rd place: \$100 Gift Certificate from **Ginkgo Gardens**

