

Martial arts studio features all-ages Special Abilities program

BEDFORD NEWS

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Emily Therrien is determined that all of her students will succeed.

The American Taekwondo Association, Martial Arts of Southern New Hampshire co-owner and senior instructor teaches the Special Abilities class, which she created in 2010, twice a week to children and adults.

“We had a lot of kids who were special-abilities-classified, and we noticed that some kids succeeded, yet others stayed where they were and they weren’t reaching their goals,” Therrien said.

She added that students with ADD and ADHD benefit from martial arts because it helps their concentration. “A lot of people came to us with these abilities, and they had been turned down by other schools, so we wanted to find a way to work with them.”

The studio accepts students throughout the special-needs spectrum, including those with high- and low-functioning abilities such as ADD and extreme autism or Asberger’s.

Since 2007, ATA Martial Arts has expanded to two locations in Bedford and Derry.

In 2010, instructors met with SpedPac of Bedford, a special education parent advisory council, where “one parent invited us to sit in on the group to learn what, as the parents of students with special abilities, needed,” which is information the studio uses to tailor its program.

“We have one-on-one interviews with the parents and child so that we can get to know the family, and what they need, and how we can adjust this program to suit their needs.” The studio also has a form for parents to fill out.

“Our real mission is to be a place where people can come together and be family,” Therrien said.

“Before coming here, we really looked around at what other places had to offer,” said parent Kate Sussman. “But this was the best choice, because it was appropriate for our children.”

“We go to tournaments, and we go out to dinner, and we’ve become friends,” Sussman gestured to another parent. “The kids become friends, too.”

At their sister school in Derry, Dianna DeNapoli, a certified instructor and fourth-degree black belt, teaches Special Abilities, during which time she works with adults and has worked with adolescents.

The needs of the Special Abilities class is approached “day by day. If they are having a hard day, then I follow their lead.” Therrien said she listens to what the students say, as well as their body language. “If they’re not getting the kicks, then I don’t force it. We’re teaching the kids to be flexible, and we’re showing that we’re willing to be flexible, too.”

The students in the Special Abilities class go through the regular belt progressions on four-month cycles, instead of two-month cycles like other classes, so they work toward “leveling up” at their own pace.

“One of our students last week learned to jump rope,” Therrien said. “It sounds easy, but he is 13 and has never been able to do this. But with a lot of repetition and practice, he’s able to jump rope. He has been with our class since the very beginning. When he came to us he wasn’t very talkative, but now he’s able to express to his parents what he is thinking and he smiles a lot. Now, he’s a camo belt.

“We work with the parents, and they work with us. I’ll have parents come over to me and say, ‘This is what we’re teaching them at home. Can you reinforce this?’ and we will. We use repetition and routine, so the kids can build confidence and be successful in school now and later in their lives.”

Sam Sussman, a brown belt and one of Therrien’s class assistants, has been at the studio since February, and he said, “I just like getting a good stretch and helping people.”

Monika Dumais, a first-degree black belt and assistant, has been in the program for three years and helps redirect the kids. Fellow student and father Rick sometimes fills in for Therrien, where “My faithful, right-hand ninja helps me run the class, too.”

ATA Martial Arts has a variety of programs, including a leadership class that sets new goals each month. In January, the theme was “Goals,” during which time instructors asked students to consider “What is a good goal? What is not?”

“We are always setting goals in class, like being a good listener and standing up a little straighter,” Therrien said.

The ATA Martial Arts of Southern NH mission statement is “Building tomorrow’s leaders ... one black belt at a time.”

The Special Abilities class meets Monday and Saturday. The full schedule may be viewed on its website at www.bedfordata.com.

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