

Catholic Life

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Karate priest stresses moral

By SUSAN K. MAZUR

BRENTWOOD — It's not the clatter of a bingo game or the din of a parish council meeting that echoes off the walls of St. Sylvester Church Hall on Thursday nights. It's the sound of the Korean spirit yell.

Every Thursday, Father Robert P. Connolly, pastor at St. Sylvester, leads a group of about 45 students in the art of Korean karate, or Tae Kwon Do.

Although it's common for the word "karate" to conjure up images of Chuck Norris or Bruce Lee, Fr. Connolly quickly teaches his students that fighting and self-defense are not the primary goals of his eight Se Jong Tae Kwon Do (pronounced tie-qwon-doe) schools.

"Se Jong Tae Kwon Do is not a self-defense," he stresses to his students. "If you're good, you'll probably never have to use it as self-defense."

Indeed, the lack of emphasis on the "martial" aspect of this martial art led Fr. Connolly to name his Tae Kwon Do schools "Se Jong," after the Korean king who established the first Asian alphabet. He tries to offer his students an intellectual, reasoned approach to karate.

"We'll teach you everything

our patience. Some of it will be easy and some of it will be very hard, but we don't want you to get discouraged."

This atmosphere of guidance and nurturing has encouraged well over 1,000 students to begin instruction with Fr. Connolly since he started his first school in 1978. But he is the first to admit his approach quickly weeds out those students who hope to simulate the fast, easy thrills of Hollywood's kung-fu movies.

Fr. Connolly estimates that only about one percent of the students who begin his classes will stay and advance through the belt ranks. He believes this is due to the discipline and length of time involved to succeed.

But he adds, "The majority of kids who do take (Se Jong) are better for taking it."

James Sheehan Sr., believes three of those kids are his sons, James Jr., Michael and Bobby.

James Jr., 27, became involved with Se Jong as a 13-year-old. Now a black belt, he instructs Fr. Connolly's Overbrook school at St. Norbert Parish.

"When I first joined," Jimmy says, "I joined for self-defense. I was always the smallest kid — got beat up a lot — so I wanted to learn to protect myself. Once I got

myself, not only physically but spiritually."

Spirituality plays an important role in Fr. Connolly's schools. With each pattern and through each belt level, the students learn more about the four respects of Se Jong — God, master, self and others.

Two of those respects — for self and for others — have developed more strongly in Jimmy's brother Michael as a result of Se Jong. A second-degree black belt, 23-year-old Michael joined Fr. Connolly's class at the age of 12.

"Tae Kwon Do," Michael says, "has helped me in a lot of ways, with my temper — I had a really terrible temper — and with discipline. I've tried other styles (of martial arts) but it's just so much easier to study with Fr. Connolly."

The youngest of the three Sheehan boys, Bobby, is now a red belt and began studying Tae Kwon Do when he was just eight, primarily because he idolized his older brothers.

Encouraged by the positive effects Se Jong had on his sons, James Sheehan Sr. became involved with the art after Jimmy became a black belt. He too holds a red belt and, along with his sons, will test for his next belt



Karate priest stresses moral discipline to students

(Published in the Pittsburgh Catholic newspaper, Friday, June 28, 1991.)

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Although it's common for the word "karate" to conjure up images of Chuck Norris or Bruce Lee, Fr. Connolly quickly teaches his students that fighting and self-defense are not the primary goals of his eight Se-Jong Tae Kwon Do (pronounced tie-qwon-doe) schools.

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Indeed, the lack of emphasis on the "martial" aspect of this martial art led Fr. Connolly to name his Tae Kwon Do schools "Se-Jong" after the Korean king who established the first Asian alphabet. He tries to offer his students an intellectual, reasoned approach to karate.

"We'll teach you everything you need to know," he tells his new students, "and we'll be very patient with you. We never lose our patience. Some of it will be easy and some of it will be very hard, but we don't want you to get discouraged."

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proach quickly weeds out those students who hope to simulate the fast, easy thrills of Hollywood's Kung-fu movies.

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But he adds, "The majority of kids who do take (Se-Jong) are better for taking it."

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"When I first joined," Jimmy says, "I joined for self-defense. I was always the smallest kid — got beat up a lot — so I wanted to learn to protect myself. Once I got into it, I realized it was a lot more than self-defense. It was a whole new way of being able to better myself, not only physically, but spiritually."

Spirituality plays an important role in Fr. Connolly's schools. With each pattern and through each belt level, the students learn more about the four respects of Se-Jong — God, master, self and others.

Two of those respects — for self and for others — have developed more strongly in Jimmy's brother Michael as a result of Se-Jong. A second-degree black belt, 23-year-old Michael joined Fr. Connolly's class at the age of 12.

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The youngest of the three Sheehan boys, Bobby, is now a red belt and began studying Tae Kwon Do when he was just eight, primarily because he idolized his older brothers.

Encouraged by the positive effects Se-Jong had on his sons, James Sheehan Sr., became involved with the art after Jimmy became a black belt. He too holds a red belt and, along with his sons, will test for his next belt level this month.

"I think this is great for teenagers," says Mr. Sheehan, "an excellent outlet for all that energy and boredom. I'd like to see it incorporated into high schools. It's an excellent way to teach kids discipline. My kids have never gotten into any trouble, and I believe that is a direct result of Tae Kwon Do."

Discipline plays an important role in the study of Se-Jong. The patterns become more involved as the students advance through the grades, and even the higher belts must concentrate on every movement in order to complete a pattern correctly.

In addition to physical and mental discipline, Fr. Connolly expects his students to develop a moral discipline. He gives them the tools to accomplish this goal by emphasizing respect and responsibility.

The students learn the basics of respect during their very first class, says Fr. Connolly. They are taught to show respect for the room in which they learn by bowing as they enter and leave. Next comes respect for the flag and then respect for the master and the instructors. The students must bow to every black belt and must address those of a higher belt level as "sir," "ma'am," "Mr.," "Mrs." or "Miss."

Responsibility is stressed, Fr. Connolly says, by expecting the students to preform basic functions like cleaning the church hall after class or volunteering their services during parish bazaars or special proj-

ects. Though his classes are non-denominational, the students work willingly, he says, understanding their debt to the church, which receives no financial gain from the classes.

Fr. Connolly's students recently have begun a special project of their own: they are building a Tae Kwon Do camp on 19 acres of land in Slippery Rock. The majority of the students give up weekends and nights to clear land and begin construction of cabins where students will stay during week-long, concentrated Se-Jong workouts.

In addition to the schools at St. Sylvester Church in Brentwood and St. Norbert Church in Overbrook, Fr. Connolly is master, or founder, of six other schools: St. Henry Church in Arlington Heights; St. Alphonsus Church in Springdale; Most Blessed Sacrament Church and the Allegheny Valley YMCA, both in Natrona Heights; Freeport Junior High School in Freeport; and Twirling Etc. in Saxonburg.

Fr. Connolly became interested in the martial arts as a boy growing up in Green Tree. A neighbor encouraged him and his friends to study Akido, another eastern art. Since then, he has used the art of Tae Kwon Do to improve the self-esteem and behavior of countless youth.

Though Fr. Connolly admits that many of his students go through a hero-worship phase with him, he insists the relationship changes as the students mature in the art.

The students realize, he says, that "I didn't do anything for them; they did it for themselves. I just exposed them to (their potential)."

He has never had a student join the religious life as a result of his influence in class, but Fr. Connolly says he has had wayward Catholics come back to the Church and a few non-Catholics consider joining.

And how do Fr. Connolly's parishioners feel about their black-belt priest?

“I’ve never (personally) heard any negative comments, but I’ve had other people tell me of negative comments they’ve heard like, ‘You’re a priest and you teach people to beat each other up’.” But he adds, “We all have aggression in us and the patterns

are positive expressions of that aggression. We take the aggression and make it peace and tranquility.

“Most people,” he adds, “are very enthusiastic about having so many kids involved.”

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