

Inspired black belt students bring home the coveted gold

BY JEANNE FERRIS

Two area martial arts competitors brought home gold at a recent tournament, illustrating the successful methods of instructor Stephanie Zeno at American Family Martial Arts in Solana Beach.

Andrew Renner and Felicia Ferris recently competed in the AK Martial Arts & Fitness Annual Friendship Tournament. Renner won first place in forms in the Black Belt teen division. Forms are choreographed defensive and offensive moves, increase in difficulty with each rank, and require memorization and precise execution.

Ferris, a senior at Canyon Crest Academy, won first place for point sparring as the only female in the Black Belt teen division.

Renner is the leader of the AFMA Cohort 2014 and aiming for his third degree as a black belt. A nationally-certified karate instructor, he teaches tae kwon do part time while studying psychology and communications at Cal State San Marcos full time. AFMA Cohort is mandatory and an arduous five-month commitment for any student choosing to earn a black belt or a higher degree.

"I've been studying with Ms. Zeno at AFMA for 12 years," he said, "and she has been a great role model in teaching that if I really want something in life, I have to work hard and persevere through any and all hardships. The outcome in the end is always more satisfying when you have conquered the challenges [of] your goals."

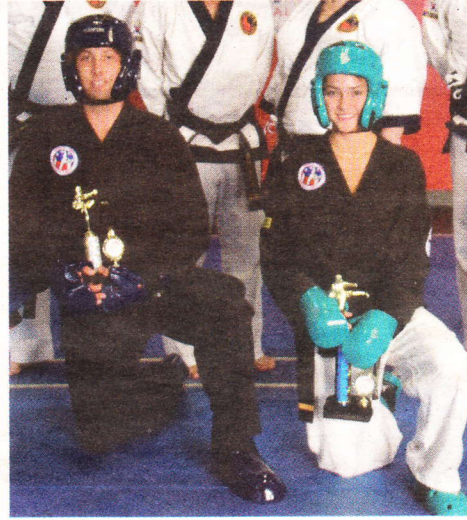
Ferris is also a student at AFMA and studying for her second degree in Co-hort.

Both Renner and Ferris volunteer with St. James Mission Circle, a charitable organization that serves the disadvantaged both locally and internationally.

Their instructor, Stephanie Zeno, is an example of AFMA's tae kwon do tenets of courtesy, integrity, perseverance, self-control and indomitable spirit. Zeno is a 5th-degree black belt and works personally with children as young as 3 years old.

"Ms. Zeno has been an amazing influence on my son, Brody," said Estela Leidy, a Skyline Elementary kindergarten teacher. "He has been studying with her since age 4 and we just love her."

Zeno's motto? The words of Nelson Mandela: "The tiny seed carries the promise of the mighty tree. You must invest in your youth."



Andrew Renner and Felicia Ferris.

As sole owner of AFMA, she has sown seeds of success since 1990.

"Our program is unlike any after-school enrichment or YMCA class," said Zeno. "Our direction is about enriching the lives of our students and their families, not only through martial arts, but by living the tenets. There are many skillful masters in martial arts, but not all of them know how to teach. We teach through positive reinforcement — very different from most martial arts schools."

AFMA's regional director is Master Stephen Truscott, Zeno's teacher. AFMA is associated with Family Karate and founded by Master Charles E. Hawkins, 72, who recently earned a 10th-degree black belt, the highest rank.

His teacher was Grand Master J. Pat Burleson, also a 10th-degree black belt, director of World Martial Arts Ranking Association (which all black belts test under) and the first U.S. National Karate Champion in 1964. Burleson trained under Grand Master Jhoon Rhee, who is credited with bringing tae kwon do to the United States.

This past year, 14 black belt alumnae revisited the AFMA dojang from countries as far as Denmark and Australia — once a family karate member, always a member.

Visit solanabeachkarate.com or the dojang at 124 Lomas Santa Fe, Suite 106, Solana Beach.