

"BLACK BELT" MAGAZINE ON MARTIAL ARTS AT THE COMMUNITY LEARNING CENTER

# "READING, WRITING AND FIGHTING IN THE OAKLAND GHETTO"

By Jim Hoffman

The following article is reprinted from the August, 1975, issue of Black Belt magazine. Black Belt is the world's leading monthly of self-defense with a circulation of 600,000 in the U.S., Canada, Japan and Europe.

East Oakland, California, is not a nice place to visit and you wouldn't want to live there. Most of what is bad about America is worse in East Oakland and most of what is good about America isn't there at all.

In East Oakland, unemployment, disease, illiteracy, crime, poverty and mortality are all on the heavy side of the national averages. There are few parks. For recreation there is only the street, a harsh terrain cluttered with the debris of a cruel and wasteful era — rows of deserted store-fronts, shattered glass, broken people.

## ENVIRONMENT

Hardly the ideal environment for raising children. Much less a place where you would expect to find a school designed as a model of quality education for all communities — the poor and the privileged, the Black and the White. But thanks to a determined and courageous group of people, the school exists. In fact, it thrives, a beacon of hope in a wasteland of human and material desolation.

The Intercommunal Youth Institute was founded in 1971 by the Black Panther Party, which was seeking an alternative to the inferior education being given their children by the Oakland public schools. In 1973, the school became legally independent and is now community-based, drawing most of its enrollment from outside Panther families.

In each of the four years since its birth, the school has added more students and more programs, always striving to create a model for those seeking an alternative to the deteriorating institution known as the public school. This year, the Intercommunal Youth Institute added martial arts to the curriculum for all its students.

While the martial arts program is still young, it is rapidly becoming a favorite of school officials, parents and students. It

is an ideal program for the school in many ways. For one thing, the school doesn't have a lot of money for physical education. Martial arts, unlike many sports require no special playing field and, except for sparring gear, no special equipment. At a time when many U.S. school systems are cancelling sports programs for lack of cash, this is an important consideration.

Another reason the school offers martial arts is the immediate practical value of knowing self-defense. As instructor Steve McCutchen tells his students, "You can walk around the corner from here and get chased home. There will be many times when you will have to fight or run. What you will learn here is that 'fight or run' doesn't mean the end of the world."

But perhaps the most important reason for teaching martial arts at the Intercommunal Youth Institute is the philosophy of the school itself. Unlike traditional public schools where "discipline" means a set of punishments and rewards that are imposed by teachers and authority figures, the Institute emphasizes internal discipline. The children progress at their own rate, and it is not uncommon for a seven-year-old student to learn math with 10-year-olds and reading with five-year-olds. Because the children are not automatically advanced from year to year, they must develop the desire and discipline to learn within themselves.

Martial arts instructor harmonizes well with this focus on internal discipline, according to the school's director Ericka Eugin. "All the children admire Bruce Lee," Ericka says. "We want to show them that what went into Bruce Lee was a lot of hard, hard work, and that every human being needs internal discipline."

This approach appears to be contributing to the success of the school which is rapidly achieving the kind of local notoriety that often prefigures bigger things. "Children beg to come here," Ericka says. "You should see them some days. It's so sad. They're supposed to be in their own schools, but they come here and peek into the class-



Instructor STEVE McCUTCHEN showing fundamentals to students.

doors. Some come here just to go up to our library and read."

There is much for public school children to envy at the Institute. Unlike the public school ratio of 40 students to one instructor, the Institute has 20 instructors for its 100 children. In addition to the regular curriculum, the school provides instruction in three languages, art, music, drama and dance. The social studies class is specially designed to give the children — all Blacks and Mexican-Americans — an idea of their cultural heritage and of the realities that face them in contemporary society.

## FREE EXPRESSION

In contrast to public school instruction, which consists mainly of memorization and drilling, the school encourages the children to express themselves freely, to explore, and to question the assumptions of what they are learning, as children are naturally inclined to do.

This combination has produced some notable successes. "We have children here who were labelled hyperactive, educable retardates and all kind of crazy things," Ericka says. "They come here and they just blossom into the flowers that they really are."

All this is accomplished without charging tuition and without financial support from government. A "strong parents' group" contributes \$15 per month each, but this would not even cover the cost of salaries, unless many of the teachers worked for nothing, purely out of their sense of

dedication and their knowledge that they are providing the hope these children have Ericka. "We would do a lot of something criminal make this school survive."

One of the instructors who works without pay is 25-year-old martial arts teacher Steve McCutchen. Soon to be a rank in taekwon do (the equivalent of a brown belt in karate), he teaches 10 sessions a week after school, and two sessions a science teacher. The school decided to inaugurate physical education programs by volunteering himself as a martial arts instructor.

Steve's class was an immediate success. "It's just beautiful. Children have this much interest in strengthening their bodies," Ericka comments. "Children don't know about discipline, it's something they need. It's a way of helping them understand through something they like."

"Steve is a good teacher," she continues. "He's teaching them how to be responsible, how to conduct themselves. We had a problem with people running around at each other. But Steve is an example of control. You see him running around side people."

The class proved so successful that the school soon added after hours programs for adults. The young adult program is

CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE

# Reading, Writing And Fighting In Oakland

CONTINUED FROM PREVIOUS PAGE  
 The Learning Center offers many after hours classes locally as the Learning Center. Like the other after hours classes, it gives community members an opportunity to learn without being enrolled officially. The Learning Center is always full to the brim with kids," says Ericka. "This building is the heart of East Oakland where people can come and feel free to do whatever they want." Parents in the young adult program tend to be public school students who are, on the average, older than the age group (about 13) served by the center. Many say they joined the program after street fights with opponents. Most say they stay with martial arts until they earn a black belt. The program is immensely popular to the two dozen or so men who participate.



Martial arts students at practice sparring.

Steve has what is necessary to help the kids want to have fun, to learn," says Ericka. "You can look, the kids he works with would be robbing stores if weren't here, not because they're innate criminals, but because there's nothing to do — except in East Oakland but in the whole country — for Black and Hispanic children. Nothing." The after-hours program is still going strong. In the near future, it will be expanded to include another program from nearby Laney High School.

Steve's goal is to serve the particular needs of the people he teaches, and he gives a martial arts course that differs in several respects from what is taught in the traditional dojo. It is, as Steve describes it, "an application of Bruce Lee's jeet kune do philosophy to tae kwon do. It's based on the idea that truth in combat comes from one individual to another."

Steve combines practical instruction with a generous helping of martial arts philosophy and scientific background. He is himself a student of kinesiology, the science of bodily movement as it relates to body structure, and he has applied this knowledge to martial arts.

"There are certain laws in operation when the body is moving," he says. "The student has a right to know them."

When an instructor explains a technique, he should explain how and why it works. The student should learn that a kick or punch, demonstrated in a certain way, is not the only way the kick or punch can be executed, because structural mechanics differ from person to person. With a knowledge of the principles, the student can actualize the technique in his own body. As they go along, they learn the connection between one type of movement and the overall movement of the body."

Steve believes this approach allows the instructor to accelerate the learning process, and he believes his method of teaching is superior to traditional instruction. The traditional instructor tries to keep his student for a long time," says Steve. "In some cases, it's three to five years before you can freesparring that's free to five years before you can keep from being knocked on your hind."

What it adds up to," he continues, "is that traditional instruction teaches you forms, movements and so forth, but it doesn't prepare you for stress conditions on the streets. Most schools say what you learn today, you can use today. But when I teach the basic up defense, side kick, front kick, they were all done from a position that didn't account for a person moving around in front of you. Here, we are teaching contemporary combat techniques."

Because the program is still in its infancy and because there is no sparring equipment, students do not yet spar with each other. Instead, they concentrate on building strength and learning movements. The younger groups study kata exclusively and the youngest study yoga. This instruction is designed to reinforce the unity of mind and body.

Many of Steve's younger students have not even realized that they are learning a fighting art. The older students are acutely aware of this of course, but so far the only sparring is between Steve and some of the faster learners.

At some point Steve's students include some tournament fighters, but unlike many other instructors, Steve is not grooming students specifically for tournament competition.



BPINS photo  
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Disciplined students hard at

at competition. "We haven't made any plans to participate in tournaments," he says. "That will require a little more experience. But in any event, tournaments are part of the commercialization of martial arts and that's not what we're about here."

### FITNESS AND DISCIPLINE

As the program continues, Steve hopes money will become available to pay for equipment expenses. But even if there is no money, the martial arts will continue to be taught, according to Ericka, "because people need it. For discipline. And for physical fitness. And even more important, in the view of the people whose lives center around school, is the hope that training in martial arts will prevent the brutalization of the young that so often occurs in the ghetto. This is a violent society," Ericka says. "Children fight at four or five, unless they have someone like this to come and find out what's not the way to resolve things. We're hoping that what they learn about fighting will allow them to remain inwardly calm enough so that, instead of fighting, they can work things out in a more humane manner, even though they are capable of really getting someone out."

Steve's same hope is echoed on the blackboard in one of the school's classrooms, where a disciplined young teacher has listed, under the heading "Martial Arts Philosophy," a set of principles, one of which speaks as eloquently for the school and the hopes it carries as it does for the martial arts.

"The man who masters himself," it says, "has no need of another master." □


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