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Local teachers fill dual roles

Couple finds similarities between classroom, martial arts instruction

Published: Wednesday, January 16, 2008 - 2:00 am

By Rebecca Howerton
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

For martial arts instructors Bill and Ann Huggins of Mauldin, one of the most fulfilling aspects of teaching is seeing their former students who come back years later as healthy, happy adults.

The couple, both teachers in Greenville County schools, have been sharing their passion with students at Huggins Tae Kwon Do Academy for 21 years.

Ann Huggins, a classroom teacher for 18 years who currently teaches second grade at Bryson Elementary, is a seventh-degree black belt, the highest level tested for in the United States. Bill Huggins traveled to Korea in September to earn his eighth-degree black belt. Huggins will have to wait 10 years before he is eligible to earn his ninth degree, the highest level to be achieved.

"It's been good for our family, and something my wife and I have shared ever since we've been married," Huggins said of tae kwon do.

Mrs. Huggins said the couple's children, Renee, 23, and Graham, 19,



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Bill and Ann Huggins have operated Huggins Tae Kwon Do Academy in Mauldin for 21 years.

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have reaped the health benefits of being involved with martial arts from an early age.

"Both of our kids were always involved in everything we did in tae kwon do, and I wouldn't trade that experience for anything," she said. "They never did sit around, and they never had any problems with weight."

Martial arts classes provide exercise similar

to working out at a gym, she said, and are suitable for both children and adults. Mrs. Huggins said she tells parents who are disappointed when their children drop out for a time not to worry, because they can go back to it at any age.

Mrs. Huggins said her experience teaching tae kwon do has helped her in the classroom, and students in her martial arts classes often gain confidence and greater ability to focus that carries over into their school life.

"I love to see a really shy child who comes in, and by the time they take that first test, when they have to get up in front of their peers and perform alone, they know they can do it," she said. "It helps so much with their confidence. I get a lot of joy out of that."

When people ask her how she puts in a full day at school, then teaches evening martial arts classes, Huggins said she tells them she doesn't know how she could do without the stress-relieving effects of her second job.

"If I didn't do tae kwon do, I'd be ready for bed at 7," she said. "When I'm teaching 7 o'clock classes, I let go of everything else. It's my time, and I'm re-energized at the end of the day."

Bill Huggins, who said he had wanted to go into teaching for some time, went back to school three years ago to study for a master's degree in education at Converse College. He was hired as a history teacher at Mauldin High School shortly after he completed his student teaching there last spring.

Huggins said a number of circumstances in his life led him in the direction of a teaching career. His mentor, Billy Hong, had urged him to open a tae kwon do school, but he resisted the idea until Hong's death in 1983, when the Korean airliner he was on drifted into Soviet airspace and was shot down.

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Hong's wife asked Huggins to take over his school, which he did, while also working as a district executive for the Boy Scouts of America.

In 1986, Huggins started his own tae kwon do school in Mauldin. For six years he worked full-time as a job placement counselor at Blue Ridge Work Release Center and ran the school in the evening. Just when he decided it was too much, and he would close the school, membership tripled.

Huggins quit his day job to devote more time to the school, and his wife quit her teaching job to work at the school for six years before returning to the classroom.

Although they are different disciplines, some things remain the same whether the subject is martial arts or history, Huggins said. He believes developing a relationship with students is critical.

"If they know that I care about them as a person and know that I want them to succeed, they're going to try a little harder," he said.

Knowing the kinds of issues students deal with in high school, Huggins said he felt drawn to that age group. He said he loves teaching at Mauldin High, where he, his wife and daughter all graduated.

"I really believe there are kids in need of a good teacher," he said. "What I bring to the table is compassion and a desire to help them achieve."

With patience and understanding, he tries to let students know he cares about more than just grades.

"It's definitely a challenge, but it's worth it. I've seen where I've made an impact on the lives of kids," he said. "As a teacher, of course you want them to pass your class, but what they'll remember is their relationship with you."

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