

# Youth finds focus in aikido class

By Tyler Roush

Sensai Bill Gray stands at the far end of the dojo holding a staff that is taller than he is.

"If you show focus, will I attack you with an 8-foot stick?" he said.

It is not a rhetorical question.

One of his students, Sammamish's Sara Crowley, stands at the opposite side of the practice hall, also called a dojo. She answers yes and darts forward, leaping over the stick as Gray sweeps it low.

The stick — not moving fast enough to deliver a lethal blow — is designed to teach students about the importance of keeping one's focus. Like aikido itself, the exercise is not meant to hurt.

For his youth class at the Aikido Academy for Children and Adults in Redmond, the goal is to make focus fun.

"The more focused they are, the faster I can go with the stick," Gray said. "We want to make focus a fun feeling."

Crowley, 11, has been studying aikido since she was 4 years old, or "as long as I can remember," she said.

In that time, she has advanced to the level of brown belt with black stripe — one degree below black belt.

"I've been doing aikido for 6 1/2 years, and each year I learn something more," Crowley said. "I mostly know things out of memory, but if I don't know something he teaches me new things."



Several aikido participants, who are all black belts, hoist Sara Crowley after she successfully completed her test. Contributed

When she tested for her stripe last June, Crowley faced opponents who were both older and larger. The petite martial artist said she was undaunted by her opponents once testing began.

"Whenever you first see them you're nervous, but once you start to work with them you sort of loosen up," said Crowley, who became the youngest student in her class to earn a black stripe.

Gray makes personal growth and leadership an area of emphasis for each of the 100 students in his children's program. Aikido is as much about building character as it is about self-defense.

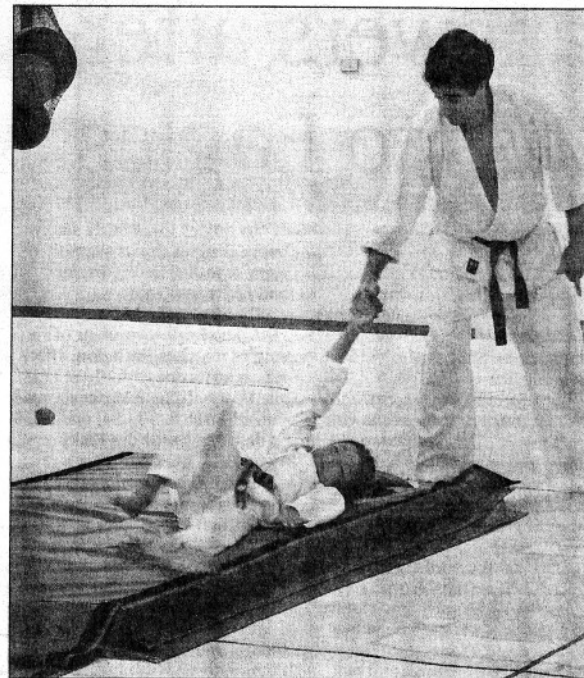
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— Bill Gray,  
Aikido Instructor —

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"I tell the kids, 'If you make yourself a better person, you make the world a better place,'" Gray said.



Sara Crowley practices with Sensai Bill Gray. Contributed

There was a new student in Gray's class recently. The sensai, or teacher, always asks his students to lead by example, show the proper posture to use in the dojo, what form to practice while making a throw and how to treat other students with respect.

Proper focus is at the root of many of these aspects of aikido.

"Always be ready and focused so you can learn more," Crowley said. "He mainly teaches focus because it shows respect and it helps you learn more so you can get better."

Focus is also at the core of the two ideas behind aikido. As Gray explains them to his class: protect yourself and protect your opponent.

"In the martial arts, focus is important because it keeps everything safe," Gray said.

Since Morihei Ueshiba developed aikido in Japan early in the 20th century, the art has evolved from an aggressive art to one that emphasizes protection and self-defense. It's a style that meshes perfectly with the goals of Gray's academy.

"The philosophy is to take out the intention to kill or hurt and make it about developing character," he said.

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