

Enter the DRAGON

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Students learn Bruce Lee moves at Green Hill Martial Arts Academy

By Lisa Reisman
Special to the Times

Be advised: If, on any given night this winter, you happen to see the wispy form of a blond girl tripping along a street in the Killingworth area, no need to be concerned for her safety. She's a street fighter. And she fights dirty.

Be aware, too, that with her cat-like quickness and lethal power, she's been dubbed the female incarnation of Bruce Lee by her instructors at Green Hill Martial Arts Academy.

Specifically, by Ed Ricciuti, the charismatic 73-year-old leading her class. With the retirement of beloved founder Arthur Blair earlier this year, it was Ricciuti, the 1957-58 Notre Dame boxing champion and decorated journalist, along with a children's book author, a Disney animator, and a biotechnology executive, all of them accomplished martial artists, who kick-started the Killingworth studio back into action this past fall.

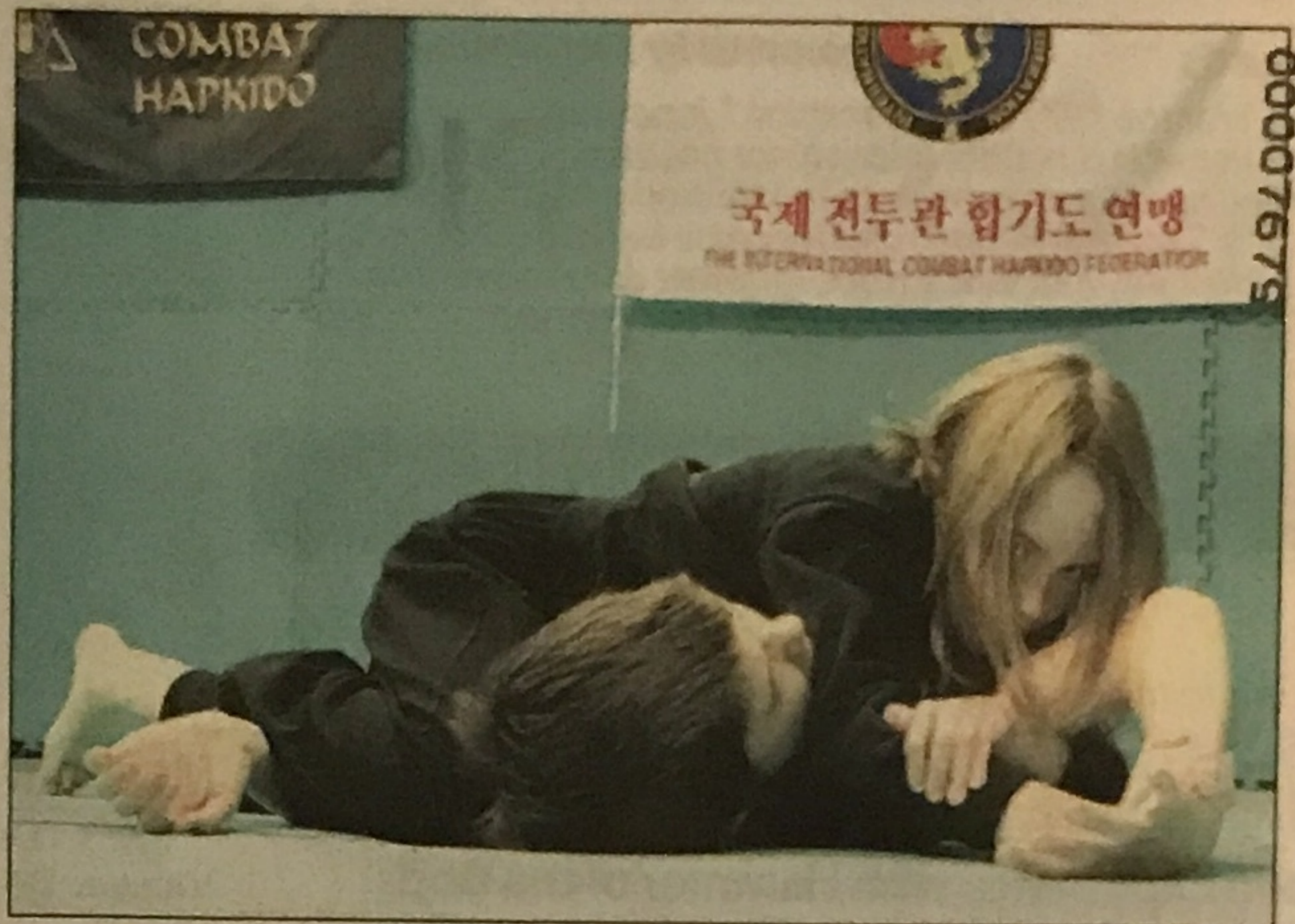
Which means 8-year-old Isabel Kessler, all 4 feet, 50 pounds of her, can continue to hone her street fighting skills. Fear not, however. Ricciuti has trained his disciple to attack only if she senses danger or if she's attacked herself. In that case, she'll meet the threat without the use of unnecessary force. As 10-year-old Kyle Neumann, a classmate of Isabel's at Green Hill, put it: "You don't break any bones right away but you can choose to if you need to. It's all about

what the attacker is doing."

Kyle and Isabel are students of Combat Hapkido, a practical martial art adapted from more traditional styles as a way to afford tools for self-defense for everyone in everyday situations. The mission of Green Hill Martial Arts: teach people to protect themselves against any conceivable method of aggression anywhere, anytime.

"This is not 'The Karate Kid,'" said instructor John Himmelman, 52, while the four members of the children's class simulated trapping drills against each other

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Lethal weapon - Isabel Kessler, all 4 feet and 50 pounds of her, takes it to the mat at the Green Hill Martial Arts Academy where students learn Bruce Lee style moves. Photo John Himmelman. Below, students perform drills of Combat Hapkido. Photo Peter Hvizdak.

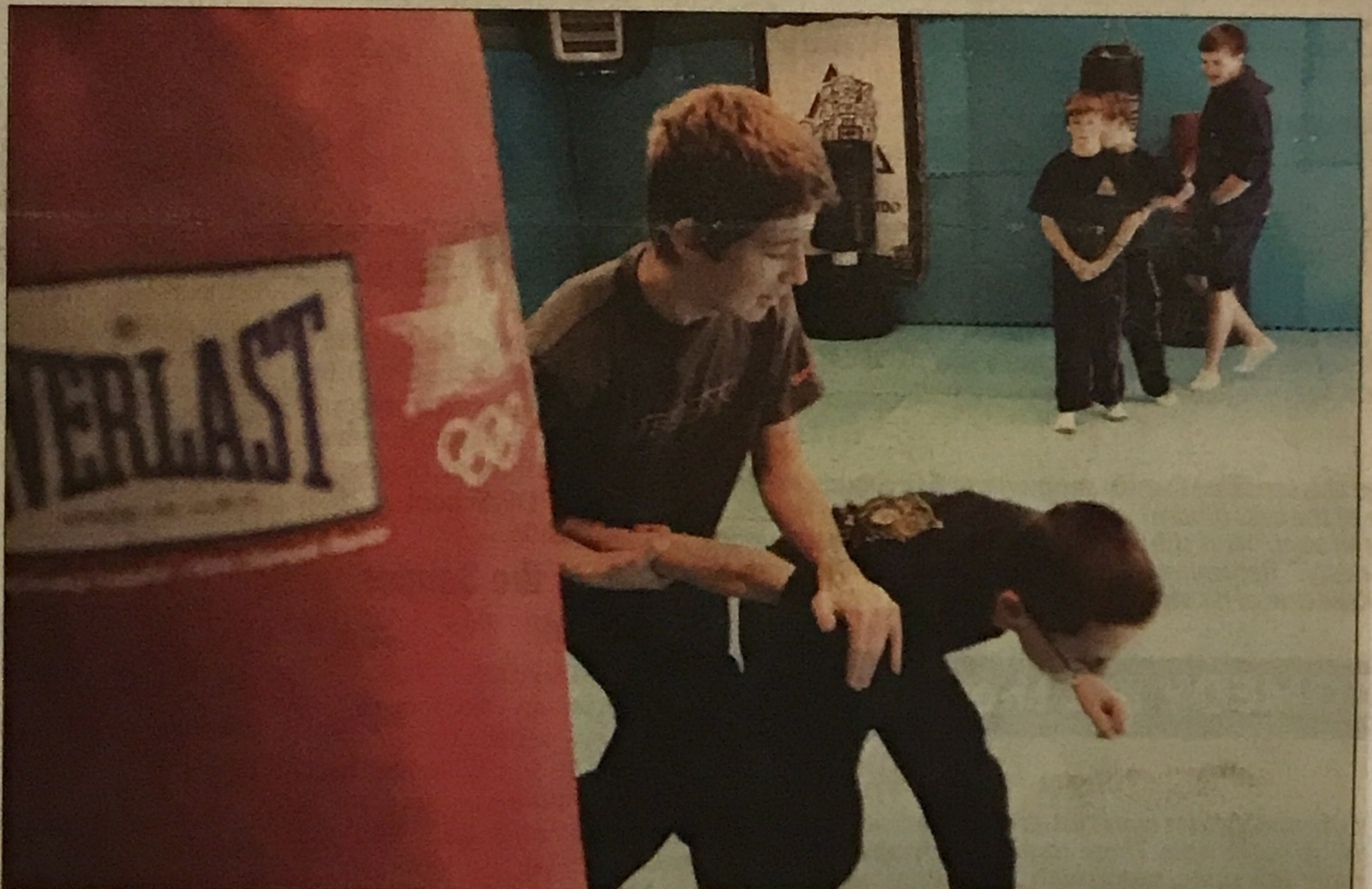




Photo above: the academy pays tribute to icon Bruce Lee in a framed photo. Isabel Kessler at 8 is considered a protege of the master. Photo left, this is not the Karate Kid. Teacher Ed Ricciuti with students Kiefer and Kyle Neuman, who practice on the mat. Photos John Himmelman.

Bruce Lee: Street fighting style makes comeback at academy

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on the green-matted floor on a recent Tuesday evening. There are no spinning jump kicks or breaking of boards. No lightning-quick punches. No tournaments or competitions. The emphasis, said Himmelman, who spends his days writing and illustrating children's books, is on "using the attacker's energy against them."

Which is why the sight of the diminutive Isabel temporarily immobilizing her 11-year-old brother Max by finding a pressure point in the pocket just beneath his ear is significant, according to Himmelman: it goes a long way in explaining Combat Hapkido's growing popularity around the world as a martial art.

And not just for kids. More and more of the out-of-shape, the disabled, and even the relatively fit baby boomer are seeking out self-defense techniques that are tough on adversaries but not on themselves.

"I travel a lot," said John's wife Betsy, 49, a student in the adult class, observing Isabel apply a vicious straight-arm wrist lock that had Max writhing in pain.

"It might not be as high-flying and acrobatic as other traditional martial arts but it gives me the skills to fight off some thug on the street or when I'm trying to get into my car."

It's really quite simple, Himmelman said, as fellow instructor Ricciuti waved a boxing glove

duct-taped to the top of a stick, challenging Kyle and his identical brother Kiefer to bob and weave out of its way. Sports have rules; the streets have none. Because every attack is unique and the defender's tactics are never predetermined, the overall goal is to develop a flexible mind and the spontaneity and creativity to make quick and appropriate responses to hostile actions.

That was the philosophy of the late martial arts icon Bruce Lee, whose likeness follows the action of each class from a poster on one wall of the soft-lit studio. Jeet Kune Do, which Bruce Lee founded and Green Hill Academy offers as a complement to Combat Hapkido, discards pre-

arranged techniques in favor of fluidity and improvisation in the heat of conflict.

Not that either Combat Hapkido or Jeet Kune Do should be construed as promoting violence. To the contrary. It's intended to stop violence. Indeed, students routinely practice several "escapes" from various holds. Nor is it a guarantee in particularly dicey situations. Then again, no martial art can claim that distinction.

Even so, there's no denying that the members of the Green Hill Martial Arts Academy enjoy a sense of confidence that they can protect themselves in the world in the event that they're ever threatened. Not to mention the awareness that knowledge and skill, not

brute force, is the key. And while there are no competitions, the school uses a 10 belt rank system with the difficulty and the number of techniques gradually increasing with each belt.

There are other incidental benefits. Just ask Ricciuti. The septuagenarian, a second degree black belt who moves with the lightness of Fred Astaire, recounted a frigid January morning when he slipped on the ice. No broken hip resulted. "I know how to fall," he said with a wry grin, adding that he's hoping to start classes for seniors

soon. "I fall about 800 times a month."

Oh, and about Isabel on the mean streets of Killingworth. These days she has other concerns, said Ricciuti. Namely, two more older brothers to contend with. And they're both students at Green Hill Martial Arts.

Editor's note: Green Hill Martial Arts Academy, a nonprofit business, is located on 149 Green Hill Road in Killingworth. For more information, visit its website at www.greenhillmartialarts.org or contact them at 860-663-3225. Or just drop in for a class. The first one is free.