

Woods man honored as top karate master

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Grosse Pointe Woods resident Michael J. Schaefer, a ninth-degree blackbelt and a trial lawyer for AAA of Michigan, was promoted to one of the highest honors of the Karate International Association of Isshinryu recently.

Schaefer, president of the Grosse Pointe Karate Club who leads students in basic training and fighting techniques, was named a grandmaster in the art of karate. The local organization's dojo is at the Neighborhood Club in the City of Grosse Pointe.



Photos by Renee Landuyt

Schaefer recently was named a grandmaster, one of the highest honors of the Karate International Association of Isshinryu.

His elevation comes as no surprise to his followers, who include his old training partner from law school, Macomb County Public Defender Thomas J. Tomko, a fifth-degree blackbelt from Shelby Township. In 1985, Tomko began training with Schaefer at the Dexter-Davidson dojo, the precursor of the Southfield Martial Arts Institute.

“Grandmaster Schaefer tested for his blackbelt the same year he graduated from law school (the University of Detroit School of Law) in 1986,” Tomko said. “The blackbelt tests of that time were brutal. He had to bare-knuckle fight each one of the 25 members of the dojo in one morning and they ranged from beginners to very skilled, higher level blackbelts. He’s done nothing but rise in karate ever since.”

Dean Shunk, a sixth-degree blackbelt from Shelby Township who is retired from the Department of Veterans Affairs, said, “Schaefer is a competitor who’s been grand champion in both weapons and katas (an exercise in fighting) at the Grand Nationals.”

In the Grosse Pointe Karate Club, many of high-level blackbelts have studied with Schaefer for years, although he also accepts new students from ages 8 to 80 years-old. Age is not an impediment, for karate skills are developed

over years of practice. While physical ability and training are important elements, Schaefer said, “Karate is 10 percent physical and 90 percent mental.”

Tomko has trained with Schaefer more than 40 years and in 2015, along with many club members, witnessed Schaefer inducted into the Isshinryu Hall of Fame.

Fourth-degree blackbelt Paul Decker of Grosse Pointe Farms, who is a finance director of Jack Morton Worldwide, has studied with him 25 years.

“I think he has a plan for each student’s development, but he has one rule for each of us: Just keep coming through the door and you will learn,” Decker said.

Schaefer has been practicing the art six days a week for 47 years.

“Grandmaster Schaefer trains with us three days a week in the dojo,” said Alex Battaglia, a fifth-degree blackbelt and owner of North Winds Building and Construction in Macomb. “He doesn’t just tell us what to do, he demonstrates it. He’s the best-conditioned person I’ve known. I can’t keep up with him.”



The other three days Schaefer trains with his mentor, 10th-degree blackbelt Grandmaster Willie Adams of SMAI. He’s been training with Adams 39 years. A number of the Grosse Pointe Karate members began their training with Adams and some continue to attend his dojo along with the Grosse Pointe dojo.

Schaefer shares his knowledge with his own students, Tomko said.

“He teaches not for the praises and accolades of others, but for the reward of seeing a student return to class each day so they can be their own best,” he said. “Each class he teaches is a challenge, from the newest white belt to the most senior black belt.”

Kim Cimini, an accountant with EHIM Inc., and second-degree black belt from the City of Grosse Pointe, said, “Even when there are 15 practitioners in a room, he doesn’t miss anything and will suggest ways to improve each one’s techniques. I think he has eyes in the back of his head.”

Former Western Michigan University linebacker Karl Tewes, a second-degree blackbelt from the City who is a financial consultant with Arcadia Settlements Group, said, “Isshinryu Karate is the opposite of what people think. It’s not about breaking boards or busting bricks with your hands or your head. It’s about how to protect yourself from a hard punch or kick, and how to go offensive. In addition to training older karate practitioners like me, Grandmaster Schaefer trains young people how to protect themselves from bullies, and women how to protect themselves from attack.”

“Grandmaster Schaefer is an extraordinary teacher,” said Dick Raspa of the City, a first-degree black belt who is professor emeritus of Wayne State University and twice the winner of the President’s Award for Excellence in Teaching, “He develops a 360-degree awareness in students and shows them how to anticipate and counter an opponent’s moves. But more than that, he stresses a commitment to impeccability in your actions in the dojo, in your work and in your personal relationships. Karate is a template for success in the world. I find it an honor to study with him.”

Practitioners in the Grosse Pointe club come from Grosse Pointe, Detroit, Ann Arbor, Troy, Armada, Macomb, Bloomfield Hills and even Petoskey.

Those interested in studying karate are invited to attend a session and talk with Schaefer. The dojo meets at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday and Thursday, with advanced practitioners at 9:15 a.m. Saturdays. More information is available at grossepointekarateclub.org/