

68-year-old silver dragon earns her black belt in Taekwondo



Mary O'Leary is proud to be called a silver dragon and just might help others become one too.

To the delight of her friends and family, O'Leary was one of nine people to earn a first-degree black belt in taekwondo Saturday at Frederick's ATA Martial Arts Center in Helena.

"We've talked about me teaching a class for those over 50; we're called silver dragons," the 68-year-old said after the black belt ceremony. "That's a possibility I never thought would come up, but I want to be open to what comes in front of me. Taekwondo helps me do that. It's spiritual, physical and your body and mindset all work together."

The name "taekwondo" comes from the Korean word "tae," which means foot; "kwon," which means fist; and "do," which means way of. Its roots began about 2,300 years ago, although the name has only been used since the mid 1950s and Taekwondo is meant to be not just a martial art, but also a way of life.

“One of the very important things we have with taekwondo is courtesy and respect,” Elena Fredericks, a fourth-degree black belt and five time double/triple crown state champ, told the students during the ceremony. “There is meaning and purpose with taekwondo. There is symmetry, balance and coordination, but also some power and strength.”

Slowly and deliberately, the students moved through the various poses and motions, at times pivoting on one foot, sometimes jumping and kicking or raising their hands in defensive or sparring mode. The two 9-year-old girls in the class kept mischievous smiles on their faces, while others were serious with concentration.

O’Leary said that she heard about the class from her dental hygienist, Debbie Jose, a 2008 state taekwondo champion.

“I saw pictures on her wall and she said her whole family did it,” O’Leary said. “She said I would like this, but it took me a couple of years to get here.

“I wasn’t planning on becoming a black belt; I just liked the exercise. But part way through, I began to wonder if someone my age could get a black belt.”

Fredericks laughed as she recalled how O’Leary came into her office, said she wanted to take the class, then left but showed up a few months later. But once again she stopped going to class, only to return a third time and stick with it.

“She told me that when she says she’s going to do something she will,” Fredericks said.

As her family gathered around O’Leary, they mentioned how proud they were of her accomplishment. But her 8-year-old grandson, Duncan McDonald, was in awe of one thing in particular.

“I’m very proud of my grandmother for breaking the board in half with her foot,” McDonald said.

Afterward, as O’Leary held the two pieces of the half-inch-thick board in her hands, she also was amazed.

“I never thought I would break a board in my whole life,” she said with a smile. “I’m so happy the spirit within me kept nagging me to go back to class. You can’t let age hold you up.”