

At karate school, harmony is the rule

By DAVID GIBSON
Staff Writer

On one side of the spartan, blue-carpeted exercise room, Kim Russo, a Ridgefield resident who is two months pregnant, practiced some basic martial arts techniques. Working out a few feet away, deep in concentration, was Ralph Cafaro, the owner of a chain of chicken restaurants. A college professor, a computer programmer, and a 10-year-old boy were among the other students recently at the "dojo," or karate workout room, above a doughnut shop in Ridgefield.

Harmony By Dojo, a Broad Street martial arts school run by John Mirrione Jr., has become a magnet for a wide variety of karate devotees who are attracted not only by Mirrione's teaching skills, but also by his insistence on integrating a message of personal and social harmony into each student's development.

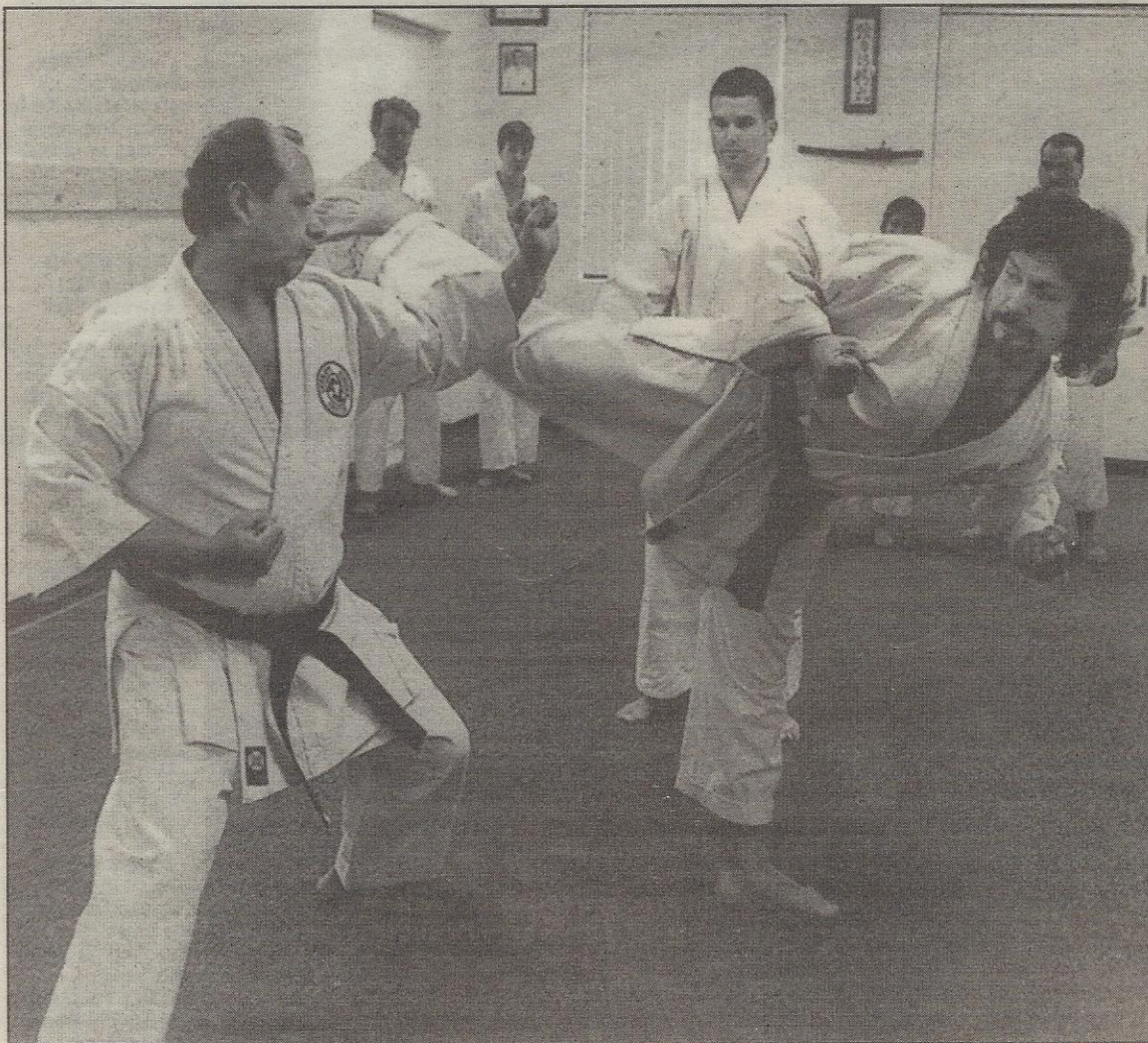
"The ills of society," Mirrione said, "as far as racism and prejudice go, can be solved by people going into themselves. That's how we learn. We can't understand others if we don't understand ourselves. The martial arts can teach you that."

The Brooklyn-born Mirrione, 29, has developed a loyal following among students who include the affluent and influential. Mirrione is the sensei, or teacher, to business executives, media stars, the staff at Columbia Records in Manhattan, and a top aide to New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, among others.

Such is the renown of the Ridgefield dojo that recently it was host to a camera crew from Joe Franklin's cable television show.

Trim and athletic-looking in his "gi," the traditional white karate outfit (tied at the waist with the black belt he earned more than a decade ago), Mirrione took time out from the taping to explain the four tenets of his approach: mind, body, spirit, and harmony.

For the mind, Mirrione stresses meditation to clear one's thoughts and relieve stress. For the body, there are the classes, usually about an hour, which emphasize rigorous stretching and aerobics



KLAUS-PETER STEITZ/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Instructor John Mirrione Jr., right, working with students Mark Carlone of Bergenfield, left, and Edwin Arenas of Jersey City at Harmony By Dojo, a martial arts school in Ridgefield.

followed by martial arts instructions.

While martial arts were born 2,000 years ago under Buddhist influence in Asia, Mirrione encourages students to respect their own religious tradition — indeed, he urges the importance of developing one's spiritual nature.

Finally, Mirrione emphasizes his belief in harmony, and the equality of all — novice to black belt. "We are all the same. We only appear different as a test to our humanity."

Mirrione is stringent. Prospective students go through a strict interview process before they are accepted for a virtual lifelong commitment. But the students — 40 all told — are unstinting in

their dedication.

"Here you get martial arts, you get philosophy, and you learn self-defense," said Keith Johnson, 31, of Park Ridge. Johnson is a first-degree black belt who has been with Mirrione for five years.

Like the others, Johnson stresses avoiding confrontation as the primary goal. "I'm very scared of what I know I can do," he said. "It has made me respect people more. You realize how fragile the human body is."

Steven Diaz, 33, of Ridgefield Park, a novice student, appreciates the spiritual side as well as the physical aspects. "I work in New York and I deal with a lot of hassles every day," Diaz said. "When I come here and study, it

relaxes me, relieves the tensions."

Several students cited the peace of mind martial arts bring. No one's story, however, was as impressive as that of Mike Carlone.

Four years ago, on his 40th birthday, Carlone, of Bergenfield, a self-described 300-pound "couch potato" with a bad back, decided to change his ways. So he joined Mirrione's school. No diets, no doctors. And today he is an impressive 175-pound brown belt, and his back is pain-free.

"There is a great spirit here, and that is what appeals to everyone," said Carlone, whose wife is also starting karate classes. "I'll never stop. This is what gives me energy." ■