

FROM TOMBOY TO MARTIAL ARTS INSTRUCTOR

Karen Bowman

still gets a kick
out of tae kwon do

BY JENNIFER WILLHITE | PHOTOS BY ANDREW LAKER

Martial arts called to Karen Bowman at a young age, however it was years before she answered.

Her neighborhood in Seymour was nearly all boys, and she says you had to buck up or sit on the sidelines. She credits the pressure with fueling her competitive nature, which at an early age came out in family games of baseball.

Whenever it was her turn to bat, her siblings would say she didn't "C-O-U-N-T." That way, when she struck out it wouldn't count against them. According to her mother, when Bowman heard this even before she could read, she would get mad, throw down her bat and yell, "I do too count!"

During school, Bowman tried to find her competitive niche in many sports. Her first exposure to martial arts in junior high was short-lived however. After earning degrees in computer science and

engineering mathematics from Franklin College, she returned to the martial arts.

"I played volleyball in college," said Bowman. "I played in the co-ed leagues. It was a lot of fun and a good experience, but I was still wanting something different. My mother recommended, 'Why don't you get back into your martial arts?'"

That was when Bowman found tae kwon do and grand master Yun S. Ko. She began to train under Ko, a ninth-degree black belt, in 1992.

"There was just something about the way he taught," she said. "There was a connection — 'OK, I want to learn from him.'" Now nearly 20 years later, Bowman is an instructor at Ko's Martial Arts Academy in Seymour.

Born and raised in Seymour, she always knew she would one day return.

IN HER DAY JOB

Gracefully balancing her full-time job as a business systems analyst for Cummins and her classes at the academy, Bowman spends what little free time she has outside, gardening or relaxing. During colder months, you'll find her training. Not having competed for several years, she anticipates returning soon.

"Grand Master Ko is very technically sound," Bowman said. "And I think that's really perfected my technique to where I could compete at a national level. So I'm thinking I've got a couple goals still in mind, so I may get back in the competition ring."

Kristie Vogel, her husband and two sons have taken lessons from Bowman since 2008. Vogel says she admires not only the way Bowman handles her busy schedule but the rapport she has with her students, especially the children.

"She demands respect from all her students, and it is such a life value that every child needs," said Vogel. "She is very, very devoted to all her students, and they all look up to her as a wonderful role model."

Unlike some martial arts instructors, Bowman's style is far from militaristic. Teaching by her actions, she is stern and quick to correct a child if needed. But she also recognizes bad must be balanced with good. Shortly after correcting a child, she will find something he is doing that is good and compliment him in an effort to keep the child from internalizing the initial correction.

"I'm not really hard core, like what you see in the movies where they'll hit you with a stick," she said. "The kids are well-disciplined. They know I don't put up with foolishness, but we have fun at the same time."

EARLY INFLUENCES

Bowman credits her parents and past coaches with fueling her passion for teaching children. She says her parents were each tremendously different, yet complementary, influences in her life.

"There is so much stress and so much out there today that I just want to try to get the kids off to a good start," Bowman said. "Or be that mentor I had in the coaches that I had or in my parents."

When Tim Conner's son, James, began lessons with Bowman more than 10 years ago, the boy quickly took to her. Conner recalls that as his son progressed through the program, she became his favorite instructor and a friend.

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"He immediately liked her," Conner said, "as did all the youngsters at the school."

When one of her students was diagnosed with breast cancer, Bowman held a "break-a-thon." Called "Kick for a Chick," the two-hour event was held at Trinity Lutheran High School's gymnasium in Seymour and raised more than \$7,000. She says everyone who attended was touched in some way, either they knew the student or knew someone who had received a diagnosis.

Having worked at Cummins for 24 years, Bowman is looking forward to devoting more time to teaching and volunteering after she retires. Eventually, she hopes to offer day classes at the academy and possibly initiate a program geared toward seniors.

She anticipates a toned-down, less-regimented type of tae kwon do, focusing on range of motion and stretching, but still designed to teach the essential forms of the martial art.

As part of the children's program, the students earn stars throughout their course of study. One such star is designated for completing 30 hours of volunteer work. Bowman has a goal of one day getting her young students even more involved in the community.

"Eventually, when I retire, I would like to do more fundraising and stuff like that," Bowman said. "Put on shows for different charities."

Hoping to influence her students as much as she once was, Bowman believes determination and dedication are essential to anything one sets out to do in life.

"What I live by is, whatever you are going to do, give it your all," she said. "Be accountable and have integrity." ☺



KO's Martial Arts Academy

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