

Martial arts event hosted by YMCA

Program showcases course that teaches self-defense to city kids

BY GREG CALDWELL
Correspondent

Steve Kirby used lightning fast movement and a quick flick of his wrist and the top of the liquor bottle was left lying on the ground without a drop spilling on to the floor. This is one of many highlights at the second annual taekwondo exhibition at the Lancaster YMCA Saturday afternoon.

Kirby, a fifth-degree black belt and master of martial arts, who has been involved in the sport for more than 25 years, displayed a variety of amazing breaks to the crowd of more than 100 students and parents.

Lancaster mayor Rick Gray was also in attendance to witness the event. Taekwondo is characterized by fast, high spinning kicks. This was the early part of the show, which featured the extensive break tests that can be done in the sport. The afternoon session featured a taekwondo tournament, and involved many local children showing off moves and skills.

Some of the items Kirby

broke by using his hands and feet included a baseball bat, two-by-four boards hanging from a harness, bricks and a set of six blocks piled on top of each other.

Kirby's son, a holder of a black belt himself, and others holding higher level belts, also performed a variety of breaks, often shattering boards while someone else held them in place.

This demonstration was done to highlight the Thursday night martial arts program offered to Lancaster City children by Kirby and his assistants as a way for them to learn about self-defense and fly through life.

"Taekwondo gives people a chance to lift off the ground. The sport focuses on individual accomplishment and gives participants a better sense of confidence and self-esteem," Kirby said.

The Lancaster program is also offered by Kirby's staff at other YMCA's throughout central Pennsylvania. The program costs \$5 a night per student, with a \$15 registra-

tion fee, but the weekly fee means there is no long-term commitment, Tom Baughman, Associate Executive Director for the Lancaster Y, explained.

"We wanted to keep this program inexpensive. We ran this show last year and it helped us increase our numbers for the program. The children and parents get to see how the masters do in the sport and it gives them a chance to dream of reaching that level themselves," Baughman said. "The program gives kids the confidence to use this knowledge of the sport for self-defense someday in life."

Kirby laughed and joked as he attempted the variety of stunts, but did warn the crowd not to attempt any of them at home. When he broke the bottle, there was a jagged piece sticking up, one of the reasons why the stunts should be left to professionals.

"These are very dangerous. I have 25 years of experience that give me the authority to try these tricks for you

today," Baughman said to the young white belt taekwondo students sitting on the floor in front of him.

Kirby thanked Gray and Baughman for starting this program and supporting his vision of teaching the children about self-defense in his Safe Kids campaign.

Kirby's staff spends much of the year distributing fliers in schools throughout the area about gun and weapon avoidance.

He also talked about his after-school program, where children ages five and older can come learn the sport and stay off the streets in the afternoons.

"This exhibition is a great way to bring the community together to celebrate the sport and the safe kids' initiative," Kirby said.

Mayor Gray said the sport has an interesting level of discipline for people of all ages. "To say this demonstration was impressive is an understatement. It is very appropriate for Lancaster that Steve is teaching these kids



Greg Caldwell

Steve Kirby demonstrates his martial arts expertise by separating the top from the rest of a bottle at the second annual taekwondo exhibition held at the Lancaster YMCA.

about self-defense without weapons."

The afternoon featured taekwondo students in a tournament. The local winners in the event were: Israeli Colon, Merally Santiago, Victor Guzman, Dave Hartman, Angelo Fuentes, Lisa Clement, Keny Leshner and Bethany Hess.

Finishing second were: Juan Betancourt, Luis Santi-

ago, Briony Brundidge, Sammy Betancourt, Kyle LeFever and Tyler Griffin.

Third place went to Quinn Harvey, Rachel Freeman, Mark Freeman and Michael Heckman.

Any child interested in joining the taekwondo program can show up Thursday night between 5:30 and 6:30 p.m.