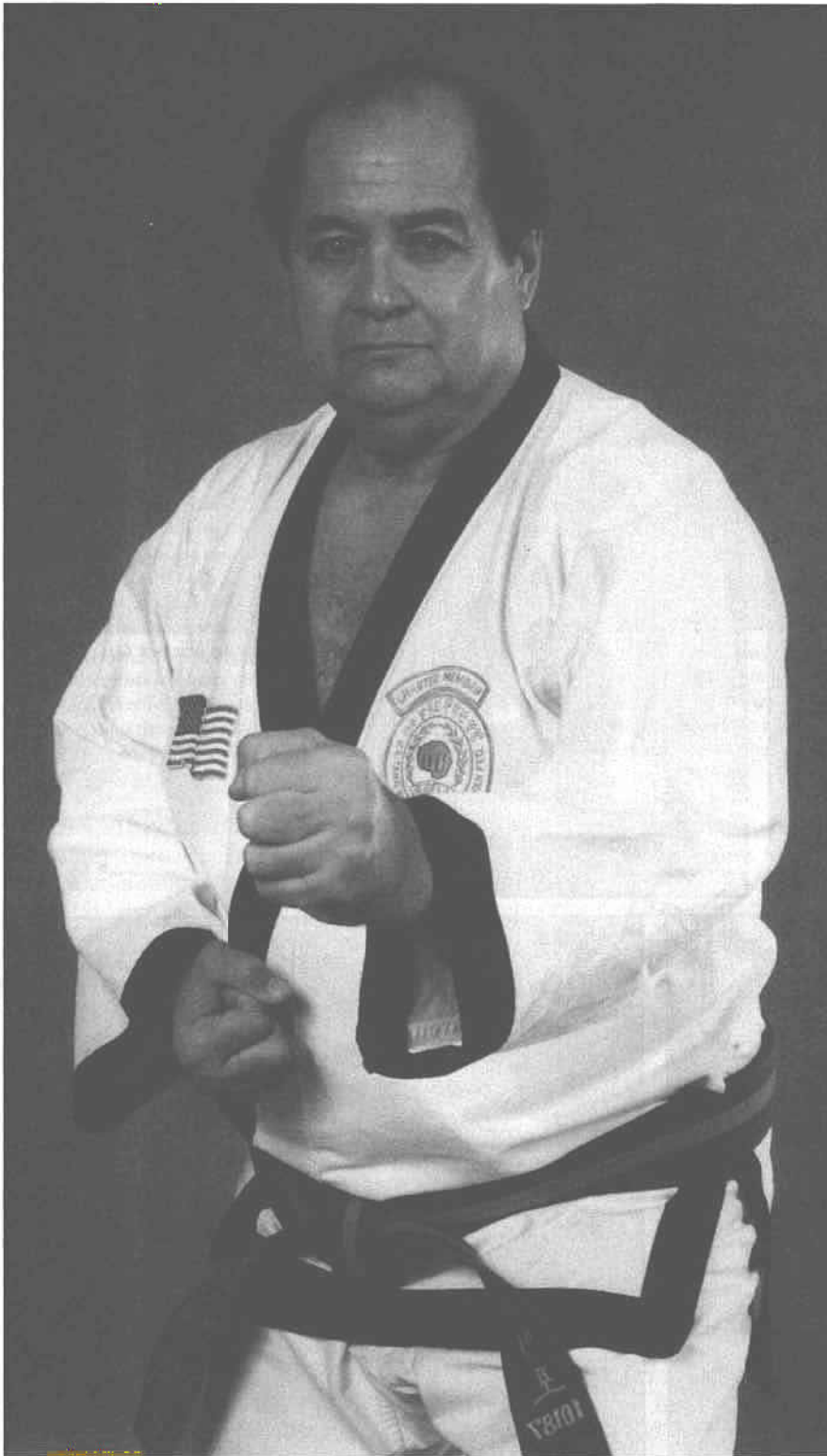


The Evolution of Martial Arts Training from the 1940's to the 1990's

By Trent K. Suzuki



Andy Ah Po has been involved in martial arts for over 50 years.

From Soo Bahk Do to Tang Soo Do and Back Again.

The term "martial arts" means many different things to many different kinds of individuals. Because of factors such as age, sex, physical attributes, geographical location, and even religious convictions, people view their martial arts training and teaching in a myriad of ways. To some, training in the martial arts represents a great way to get a workout, while also learning self-defense. To others, martial arts training can be a way of empowering oneself, as well as a way to increase their self-esteem. Yet to others, martial arts simply mean competition and a way to fulfill their ego. To one man, Master Andy Ah Po, of Sacramento, CA, training and teaching the martial arts has meant many different things over the 50+ years he has been involved in them. Ah Po, 56, has seen his attitudes change drastically over the years, as social views and cultural issues have altered the training and teaching methods he has had to use to continue providing the best martial arts instruction for his students.

At the tender age of 6, Ah Po was introduced to Kung Fu by a friend of his grandfather's, a sifu who emigrated with him from China. At 10, he moved from the big island of Hawaii to Honolulu, and since he could not find a Kung Fu instructor, began training in both Jiu-Jitsu, and Aikido, eventually achieving Black Belts in each. During high school, Ah Po achieved a Black Belt in Japanese Karate and in 1959, took up Tang Soo Do Moo Duk Kwan and has been training under the auspices of Grandmaster Hwang Kee's (the Founder of the Korean Soo Bahk Do Moo Duk Kwan Association) guidance ever since. Ah Po had a fine tournament career in the 60's and 70's, and in 1990, was appointed to the Technical Advisory Committee of the United States Soo Bahk Do Moo Duk Kwan Federation. In 1993, Ah Po achieved the rank of 7th Dan and is currently on

the Martial Arts Advisory Committee for California Athletic Commission. The following article will show one man's view on how martial arts training and teaching have evolved over the last 50 years.

Inside Karate: Please tell us the general attitude of the martial arts in the early days.

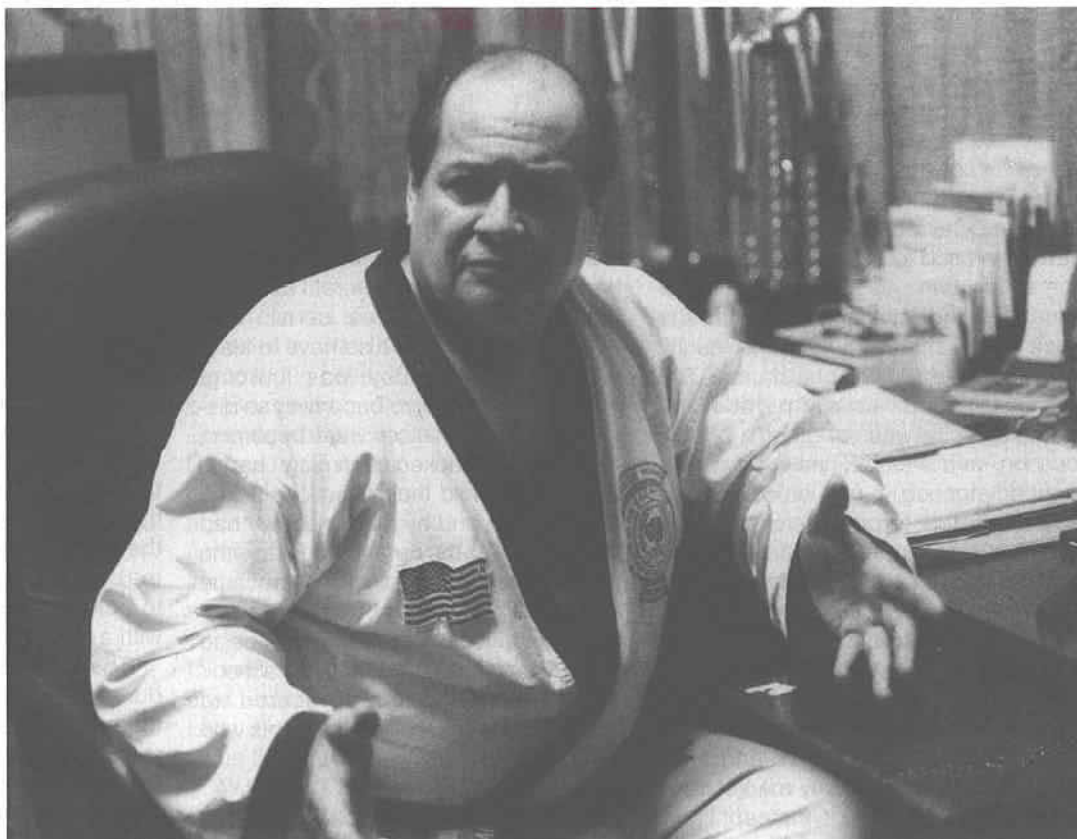
Ah Po: "In the 40's, and 50's, martial arts had little Western influence and were very traditional and closed to the general public. Virtually all instruction in those days was by Asians and while on the one hand they did not exactly want to keep their doors closed, they on the other hand were not all together sure whether the Westerners could maintain their Traditionalism or not. They wanted to ensure the Westerners understood it was not only about the fighting, but about time-honored loyalty, discipline, and respect."

IK: What was the training regimen like back then?

Ah Po: "In the 40's and 50's, there was a no-nonsense approach to training. You attended class in your cleanly pressed, traditional white uniform, the Sensei would demonstrate techniques, and you kept your mouth shut and trained. There was no explanation, you were to ask no questions, and training would last for 3-5 hours, often with no water, breaks, or rest periods! By today's standards, the training was very physically brutal. You proved yourself to the instructor each time you trained by demonstrating the number of physical traumas you could withstand. For example, on a students' first day, the instructor would make him fight everybody, make him bleed a little, then take him through the most severe, gut-wrenching workout one could imagine. Power kicking, jump kicking, full contact sparring, heavy calisthenics, etc. If the student came back, he earned the privilege to train regularly."

IK: This type of training would not be feasible in today's traditional setting would it?

Ah Po: "No, I don't think so. Many factors keep today's instructors from leading a blood and guts workout like I mentioned earlier. One, there is a concern about liability and how safe the students' training environment is. Back then, we expected to take a beating from our instructor, chalking the whole experience up to "learning how to take a beating in order to give one." We expected to be tremendously sore and there was always a lot of blood on the floor. Today's instructors have to worry about being sued for practically any reason, from being hit in class to tripping over the carpet on the way into the dojang!



Another concern preventing us from giving too difficult a workout is the majority of today's students view their martial arts training as "just another way to get a good sweat." These individuals use martial arts instruction in a cross-training type fashion, evidenced by the recent successes of the "cardio-karate" type classes. This type of attitude is great, although I have concerns that their highest priority is merely how they're going to look as opposed to learning how to defend themselves or

not. These types of students, while necessary for the bottom-line, are in my opinion missing out on learning the "moo-do," or, "warrior way." Such attributes as discipline, respect, and mental toughness are too often underestimated when the moo-do spirit is not emphasized."

IK: With the advent of the 60's, how did martial arts training and instruction change?

Ah Po: "Well the 60's became different for me in that I achieved my dan ranking in Tang Soo Do in 1966. With this promotion, I was unceremoniously told I was to begin teaching classes on my own. Let me explain... my instructor, Master Mariano Estioko, felt that when one made black belt, he was qualified

to open his own school and there was nothing more I could learn from him. Therefore, I was kicked out, and without any other words, was told to go out and open my own dojang. I was emotionally hurt, and a bit overwhelmed, but since I was loyal to my instructor, I figured he knew best so I did it without question.

I really did not know what to look for, but I had noticed that in 1964, a fellow Tang Soo Do black belt friend of mine, Mr. Chuck Norris, had opened a school



Andy's background includes extensive work with children.



Defense against a club. Andy Ah Po is menaced by Trent Suzuki (1). Trent strikes and Andy blocks (2) and pulls forward on Trent's wrist while backfisting him in the face (3). Disarming Trent, he then snaps a roundhouse kick to the head (4), transfers the club to his right hand and strikes to the neck (5), and follows up with a groin strike.

that was quite a bit different than what I had been used to. I had always trained in a school that was, for lack of a better word "behind closed doors," in the back of a recreation hall, community center, or an extension of a church. The training area was usually provided by the community, was not given a priority location, and was definitely not meant for spectator use. In fact, students were only accepted through referral by an existing student or mutual friends in the community. Mr. Norris' school was a nice, storefront type location, with big, open windows and chairs out front for interested on-lookers to sit and watch. This represented a major change to me in that the martial arts seemed to be becoming more main stream and were making attempts to quietly market itself through demonstration, a concept I had never seen before. I opened the dojang with a similar floor plan to Mr. Norris', and right away started accepting walk in students."

IK: Were these students' a different breed than what you were used to?

Ah Po: "Oh yes, most definitely! As I mentioned before, when I was a student, the instructor did not say too much, he just moved, and we moved with him. These new students however, started asking many questions on why I

was doing things this way, or that way. I was overwhelmed in that I had never had to explain myself before. I assumed that since I learned in a certain way, these students would also have to learn in the same way. Boy, was I wrong! These questions were becoming so disruptive that my classes were becoming disjointed and lacked continuity. I had to ask them to hold their questions till the end of class, and by that time, they had forgotten why they wanted to ask the question in the first place. It became apparent that I needed to develop better communication skills if I wanted to have a successful martial arts school, and I needed to be prepared to respond to questions from students who were reared in the Western Way"

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IK: Were there any other significant changes during the 60's?

Ah Po: "Yes. I began to see a few young children coming in to inquire about training. They were usually children of current students', but I never had to deal with kids before in the dojang. Other instructors simply threw the kids in with the adults, requiring them to do the same requirements as the adults. I felt this was a disservice to the children, so at the time, I made sure to include a kid's class in my curriculum with a minimum age of 8 years old.

The last significant change to occur during this era was the introduction of tournament competition. Suddenly, martial arts systems were exposing themselves not only to each other, but to the public as well. This was a landmark occurrence in that we began to see the egos come out. Stylists were very eager to prove that their system was superior to the others and this attitude began to surface during sparring competition. Japanese stylists were bad-mouthing Chinese stylists, who were bad-mouthing the Korean stylists and so on and so forth. Quite frankly, this was an important time for us because it really proved who the good fighters were. All the mystic of certain styles was forever lost when their high-ranking students went out there and got punned!



On a friendlier note, many of us from different styles would talk at these tournaments, exchanging technical information, as well as picking each other's brains for teaching techniques. I found that many of these instructors had a difficult time articulating the information they wanted to convey, further reinforcing my earlier thought of improving my communication skills. We also began having workouts between studios and different stylist, and incorporated techniques into our training from these other systems as long as they worked."

IK: The 60's seemed to bring about many changes, how about the 70's?

Ah Po: "Quite possibly, more changes occurred in the 70's than in any other era for many reasons. In the early 70's, due to Bruce Lee's television appearances and movies, martial arts became the rage everywhere. Floods of people came to train, wanting to learn among other things how to fight multiple attackers "just like Bruce Lee!" Many different types of people were coming through the door, most with some sort of athletic background, and virtually all of them with a passion or a cause to fight for. Remember that there were many issues being dealt with at the time, such as abortion, racism, and the Vietnam War. I found that developing advanced

training methodologies as well as excellent communication skills was imperative if I was to effectively teach these diverse personalities I was now exposed to. With serious goals in mind, I enrolled in college, eventually earning a Bachelors' Degree in Human Communication Studies, and a Masters' Degree in Public Administration. This education gave me an incredible advantage relating to my students, some of whom were also professionals in the law, medical, and corporate business fields. I found that to be a successful martial arts instructor, one had to become as effective a communicator, as a technical instructor, as a motivator. Little did I know how much I would value these abilities later in my life.

With the rapid influx of new students, I found that having just one adult class was not working very well anymore. You see in those days, we had white belts working out with black belts regularly. But with the number of white belt students far exceeding the number of advanced students, there was always a group being left out. If I catered the class to the seniors, the beginners were not getting the details they needed. Conversely, if I catered to the beginners, the seniors were not getting the advanced material necessary. So the 70's brought about the splitting of classes by rank and age due to the varied

needs of the particular students. Private lessons became a subject of note, as some students could not make the scheduled class times, or simply wanted more individualized attention. Finally, developing class schedules, curriculums, and teaching materials to ensure a more comprehensive, holistic approach to teaching became imperative.

In the late 70's, we saw a different type of student emerge from the others. A television series named "Kung Fu" took the country by storm. David Carradine's character, Caine, was a Shaolin monk trying to deal with Western culture. Students were mesmerized by all the philosophy being expounded upon on a weekly basis. These students were shocked to find there was more to martial arts than just the physical component. Because of the many requests I was receiving, I began teaching philosophy classes, lecturing on such subjects as meditation, relaxation techniques, and developing Chi-Gung.

Finally, the tournament karate circuit was becoming big business. Practitioners were figuring out that if they did well, they could use their karate championships and parlay them into attracting more students for their schools. Competition was at an all time high, with tournament promoters attracting hundreds of competitors on any given weekend. Some of the standouts such as Chuck Norris and Joe Lewis were able to translate their tournament success to television and movies. It was an exciting time as the martial arts in general were prospering and schools were beginning to do well."



Defense against a front kick. Trent kicks and Andy angles out of the way and deflects the force (1 & 2). He pivots and palm strikes Trent's face (3), sweeps him to the ground (4), and finishes with a punch to the face (5).

IK: Anything significant in the 80's?

Ah Po: "The momentum we gained in the 70's continued into the 80's as Norris had become the first martial arts movie icon since the passing of Bruce Lee. The combination of the "Karate Kid," Norris' movies and the popularization of the Ninja kept students coming in. There were schools popping up everywhere, as practitioners tried to cash in on all the excitement being generated by the media. But no sooner than they opened, some of these schools would close down within months. Anybody with a black belt and a few trophies thought they could have some physical skills and a conunanding voice and these attributes alone would translate into big bucks. The problem here was that many of these studio owners were not very good martial artists and had little to no business experience.

Their knowledge of sound business practices such as: real estate, demographics, advertising, and accounting skills were slim at best. Those of us who remained in business realized that it was not sufficient to be physically talented or even produce students that looked good. We also had to be effective communicators, excellent motivators, and have competent business and organizational skills as well.

In the mid to late 80's, I began to see a disturbing trend that continues today. Many of the children that were coming in, as well as some of the teens and young adults, were sorely lacking in areas that had never been a concern of mine before. These students would train hard when motivated, but as a whole, did not seem to have a strong work ethic or an innate sense of discipline. I would ask if anyone had practiced at home during the week, and if anyone

did raise their hand, their practice sessions consisted of doing their highest form once or twice and throwing a few kicks. As I mentioned earlier, I had always viewed practice as a minimum 1-2 hour time span at 4-5 times per week, that included several repetitions that were executed in an intense, serious fashion. As I soon learned, this was not going to happen on any sort of regular basis. In my era, diligent practice was an understood occurrence that did not have to be mentioned, it was simply done. During this time frame is when I began to develop many of my learning principles that would become staples of my current teachings. For example, a definition I use for practice is: "I know I've practiced when I have done a sufficient number of repetitions which help me to become both physically and mentally challenged, but which, in time, will always result in positive change." I

found that I needed to teach people how to practice, as well as how to be disciplined on and off the mat. The children were not getting this from home or school and it showed."

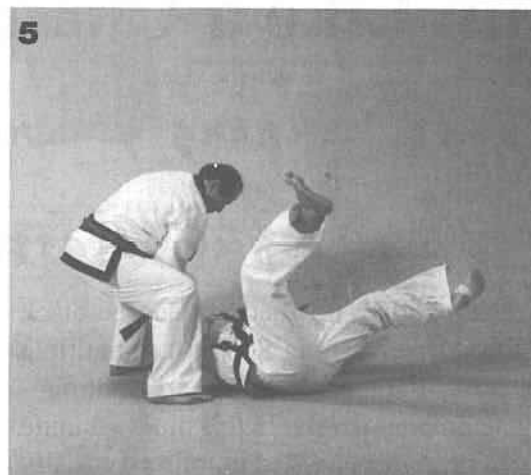
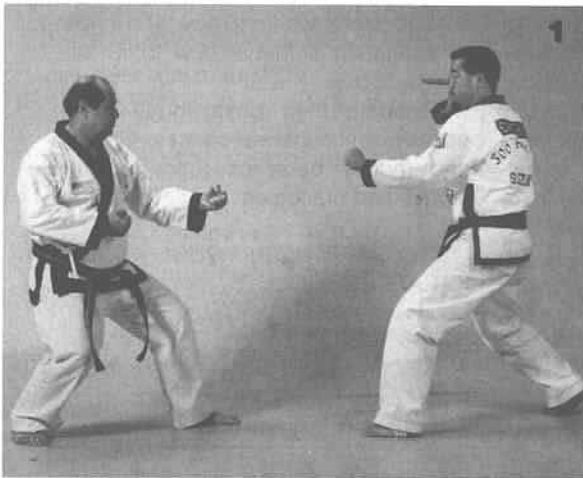
IK: This brings us to the 90's. What have we seen so far, and what can we expect through the 90's into the millennium?

Ah Po: "Like the 70's, we had a big attendance boom due to media driven reasons. Kids were coming in droves because of television shows such as Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and the Mighty Morphin Power Rangers. Because of the easy exposure, kids

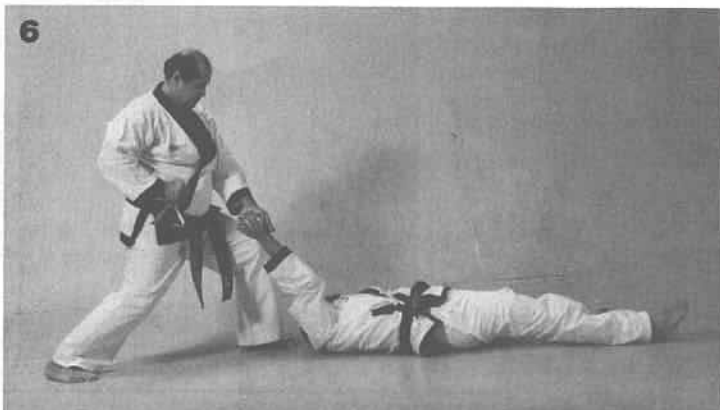
were becoming interested in the martial arts at earlier ages than ever. Children as young as 3-4 years old were being brought in by parents with unrealistic expectations. All these television shows were portraying the martial arts as a savior for an unruly child. Consequently, parents were dropping off their children at the studio and expecting my staff and I to fix all their child's problems through our "mystical" ways. It is an unfair expectation to have a martial arts instructor raise your child for you. Luckily for me, my education and other professional pursuits included many child development classes.

Were it not for those classes, I do not know what I would have done. Yet how many instructors are out teaching in their early to mid twenties, with nary a clue how to relate to a child? Just because someone has a black belt does not mean they are qualified to teach every type of student. Teaching children requires a special type of care, patience, and understanding that is not available everywhere. Make sure someone who is qualified to relate to children is teaching your child the many wonderful qualities the martial arts can offer.

I feel the complete martial arts instructor has to have many important



Defense against an overhand knife strike. Trent menaces Andy (1). As Trent attempts to stab downward, Andy blocks and stops the swing at the elbow (2). He grabs the knife (3), levers the hand back (4), and takes Trent to the ground (5). On the ground, he peels the knife from Trent's hand.



qualities if they are to be successful (not necessarily financial) at their business:

- a) Need to love this type of work
- b) Need to be a good/great physically competent practitioner
- c) Need to be able to relate to adults, teens, children, and senior citizens with equal adeptness
- d) Need to be a good communicator, capable of articulating the necessary material to any level of practitioner, regardless of age, sex, or skill level



e) Need to be an excellent motivator, capable of being creative with their motivating techniques over a long period of time

f) Need to have exceptional organizational and business skills

g) Need to be innovative and creative in their approach to teaching and presenting martial arts instruction

To me, teaching the martial arts is all about passing down knowledge to your students, maintaining tradition, and ensuring that the training is as fun and enjoyable as possible. If the instructor can provide the students with what

they want and need, even though they are not always sure of what they need, the instructor is going about Teaching correctly. The following is a mission statement that I currently use at my martial arts school:

The Mission of Ah Po's Martial Arts Studio is to help our students improve the quality of their lives through physical, mental, and spiritual development.

Our Goal is to help each student "get a kick out of life" by teaching them to feel good about themselves and how to be successful.

Our Objectives are to teach students how to be healthy and safe, how to deal with conflict, and how to develop solutions to problems they may face in life.

We teach students how to: Create mental focus.

Evaluate their physiology. Create positive emotional responses. Change and modify behavior. Enjoy positive results and outcomes.

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