

Police department clerks armed with martial arts know-how

By Brad Miklosovic

NORTH OLMSTED

The city's police department faced a problem. With only three female officers on the force, how were officers to search female prisoners if one of the three were not available?

The department solved the problem by having the department clerks—all of whom are female—search prisoners.

But this led to another problem.

"What would happen if one of the matrons were attacked while searching a prisoner?" asked officer Pat Scullin. "It was something that had to be addressed."

Thanks to the generosity of a local businessman -- Sifu Frank Versagi, owner of Shao-lin Center for the Martial Arts -- the problem was solved.

Versagi, who has taught martial arts for 20 years and has owned the Shao-lin Center for five, teaches a number of self-defense classes for women and agreed to teach the class for the police.

"When I was approached, the captain (Wayne Wozniak) told me the department didn't have a lot of funds to pay for any classes," Versagi, a North Olmsted resident, said. "So I agreed to teach the class for free. I have a business and a home in the city and they have given a lot to me, so this is a way to give back."

There was another reason Versagi agreed -- the women didn't have many training options open to them.

"I got a sense of immediacy from Wozniak voice when I talked to him," Versagi said. "There wasn't the money to hire someone and an officer wouldn't be able to train them for a while. These women didn't have many training options, so I agreed."

Versagi taught the matrons defense techniques that they can use if they are attacked in the close quarters of the jail.

The class, Versagi said, was successful.

"You can tell when someone has gotten a lot out of the class, they are excited and talkative," he said. "They appeared to have enjoyed the class."

His students agreed.

"It was fantastic," said Cheryl Sear, 47, one of the clerks who took the class. "I not only learned things I could use to search prisoners, but could use if I were ever attacked on the street."

Sears, who had little experience with the martial arts (she took one judo class in high school, breaking



North Olmsted police department matrons, left to right, Rosalie Kastelic, Linda Demaline, Pam Chesar, Mary Harwood, Karen Laforet and Cheryl Sears were taught martial arts skills by Sifu Frank Versagi in order to protect themselves if a prisoner were to attack them while conducting a search. (Photo courtesy of Frank Versagi)

her toe before quitting) had wanted to take a self-defense class and would recommend Versagi to anyone interested in the martial arts.

"He explains how and why you do something. He made us actually do what we needed to do -- not holding back -- to handle any situation. He told us that if we don't know how it feels to do some of the techniques, we wouldn't get the full effect," she said. "If someone 250-300 pounds attacked us, Frank showed us how we could get out of the situation."

Versagi emphasized one major point that his students won't forget.

"He told us to practice. We need to practice to keep our skills sharp," Sears said.

Pat Scullin, an North Olmsted officer, assisted Versagi in teaching the classes and thank Versagi for his time, effort and interest in the welfare of the community.

"Women should be prepared to defend themselves both at work and in public," Scullin said. "We were very pleased with the high level of training that Versagi was able to give our matrons."

Scullin said he believes there has been only one instance of a female prisoner attacking a matron during a search, but one is one too many times.

"It doesn't really matter if it has happened before or not," the 13-year veteran of the department said. "This is a matter of safety first."