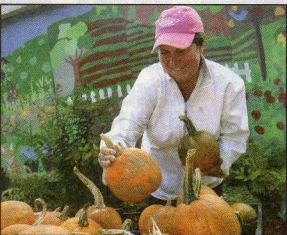


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# Farmington



🍂 Michele Garger searches for the perfect pumpkin at Eaton Farm. Photos by Lisa Brisson

🥋 Farmington High School student Marissa Malik earns her first degree black belt. See story on page 46.

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*Town council race*

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## Neighbors

### *This Karate Kid earns her black belt*

by Stephanie Riefe

For Marissa Malik, karate is not something she does, it is something she lives.

Marissa, 15, earned her first degree youth black belt on August 29 with Plus One Defense Systems in West Hartford. It took six years of work to get there. But to her, it is just the beginning.

It wasn't always like this. Her first exposure to karate was not great. She had basically written it off and was focused on dance and other sports.

Then the mother of one of her brother's friends mentioned another karate school, or dojo, that the two siblings might try. At the time, Plus One Defense Systems was working out of a building at Winding Trails.

Marissa's first impressions were good. She has been with Plus One and its owner and sensei (head instructor) Darin Reisler ever since, as has her brother, Austin.

Marissa is the first female black belt at the school, said Mr. Reisler. A sophomore at Farmington High School, she started her training in the fourth grade. Her brother was in first grade.

"She'd been doing ballet," said Marissa's mother, Diana Malik.

Soon there was no more ballet.

What drew Marissa and her mother to the school was its philosophy. Much of the education is mental as well as physical. Building character is as important as building skills and strength.

"This has benefited me in so many ways," said

Marissa one afternoon at Plus One.

She said self defense, as well as gaining confidence and becoming a better person through attitude and how you treat others, is emphasized.

"You're learning the pacifism with the punches," she added.

To teach an effective defensive system, you need to teach the moral code behind it, said Mr. Reisler. Add the elements of faith, hope and love, (the Chinese characters that are depicted in the school logo), as well as empowerment, respect for yourself and others, confidence, forgiveness, and gentleness and you have a well-rounded person.

Marissa recites the student statement: "I will develop myself in a positive manner and use what I learn in class constructively and defensively. I will show modesty, courtesy, integrity, self-control, perseverance and an indomitable spirit."

"They say it after every class," said Ms. Malik. "They internalize it."

That's a lot of repetition for Marissa, as she is there almost every day during the summer and several times a week during the school year.

The facility also offers kung-fu, Muay Thai (Thai boxing), Brazilian jiu-jitsu, Aikido, jujutsu, judo, boxing, mixed martial arts, capoeira, kali/silat, kettle bell training and more.

Marissa also does kickboxing.

She has earned a youth orange belt in Brazilian jiu-jitsu (a martial art that has a focus on ground fighting). She has competed in Brazilian jiu-jitsu, coming in first last summer and second this summer in her age group. Austin was first both last summer and this summer in his age group for the same discipline.

The fitness gene seems to run in the family, as Ms. Malik spends time regularly at the gym doing cardio and resistance training.

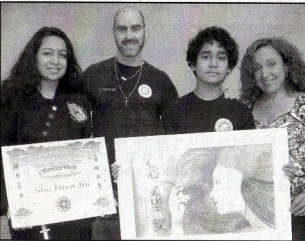
"It's an individual and a team sport," said Ms. Malik of karate. "It never ends."

But it is the idea that Plus One emphasizes so much more than fitness that hooked her and her children. Marissa refers to Plus One as "my karate family."

Ms. Malik credits Mr. Reisler for setting the tone at the school that attracts so many followers. He has been employed as a police officer and social worker and has been studying martial arts for about 25 years.

He started his school in 2002 while working full time at Tunxis Community College, opening the doors to the West Hartford location in 2005. Mr. Reisler considers himself and the school part of the

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*Marissa Malik, who received her black belt August 29, with her sensei Darin Reisler, her brother Austin and her mother Diana Malik.*

village that helps raise a child.

All ages take lessons — public and private — at the school, from five year olds to 70 and beyond. Marissa, one of the few females, is an assistant instructor.

"It's not unusual to see Marissa grappling with men," said Ms. Malik.

Marissa, who is "almost" 5'3", thinks nothing of training with the 6'3" 270-pound instructor Bruno Lichtenstein.

"I'm fighting men a lot," she said.

"She can handle herself," said Mr. Reisler, adding that she would not have received her black belt if she were not capable of defending herself.

That is another aspect of the training that is comforting to parents — their children can defend themselves. Marissa knows at least 100 defensive moves.

"There's a defense for every possible way someone could come at you," said Ms. Malik.

But for Marissa, physical confrontation is the last option. The idea is to take the most peaceful path.

"She really does embody what it means to be a black belt," said Mr. Reisler.

Marissa has incorporated her studies into some of her school work. An art project, an essay and more have all had the theme of karate. She is modest in her achievements, something Mr.

Reisler noted, as modesty is one of the themes at the school.

"She's been a bright shining star," he said, adding that she is now giving back as a role model for others.

The family may also look into the possibility of obtaining a karate scholarship at one of the colleges that offers them.

For now, Marissa has another priority. Since receiving her youth black belt, her new goal is to get her adult black belt by the time she turns 16 in March. Mostly, though, she is focused on the journey.

"It's a lifestyle," she said. **FL**

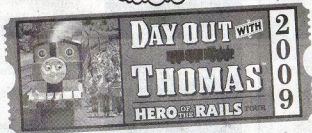
### *Earning a black belt*

Rank achievement differs depending upon the art you study. Within the Sho Biyn Jiu (translated as First Understand Peace and created by Mr. Reisler) system, the belts are earned in the following order: white, yellow, orange, green, blue, purple, brown, and then black.

Each belt level has an advanced classification. After the rank of black belt is obtained, training continues with the various degrees, up to 10, of the black belt.

At Plus One, the standard curriculum black belt examination is a process that takes three days. The exam tests a prospective candidate's fortitude on the mental, emotional and physical levels.

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