

Bender wins Lifetime Achievement Award

By Jace Martin

Bruce Bender was a student at Marion High School in 1969 when Dick Lootens, the legendary football coach, suggested he try judo. "He had taken some judo lessons down at the old YMCA, and he said 'Why don't you try it?' because I was looking for something to do," said Bender. "So I said, 'I'm starting,' and I did, and I never looked back. And that's where I've been."

Through judo, Bender has won two national championships, achieved a top-five world ranking, started his own judo club in Marion and, most recently, received a Lifetime Achievement Award from Serve Indiana. The award is given to an "individual who has exhibited a

lifetime commitment to service in their communities, primarily in Indiana."

Bender's daughter, Stephanie Yocum, thought he fit that description as a judo instructor and retired police officer, EMA director and Army veteran. So, she nominated him for the award. "My dad's face just was flashing in my head as I read through the criteria," Yocum said. "He has been holding these essentially free judo classes, which really has more turned into a community of kids and adults engaged in the sport together for 25 years, asking nothing in return and making an impact. So I just felt like it was time to show him some love and some recognition for that level of commitment to



Bruce Bender watches his class do drills at the YMCA. Photos by Jace Martin

kids and the community."

Yocum knew that her dad wouldn't want recognition, so she tried to keep her intentions quiet. "I was a little bit (nervous)," Yocum said. "I had asked him a couple questions, so he knew something was up. My dad and I are very close, so I know him well enough to know that he would be super humbled by this. I knew that it would still feel really good for

him."

And she was right: "I was humbled, very humbled, very honored," Bender said. "That my daughter had thought that much of me to do that, that's probably the best feeling I had."

A big portion of the nomination process was accumulating testimonials, and Yocum said that was her favorite part. "I spent a lot of time reaching out to

some of his former students and parents to ask them to talk about the impact that my dad's made in their life, and I'm going to tell you that was the best part for me outside of Dad getting the award. Getting to hear the way he's changed peoples' lives through this sport and through his commitment just had me in tears."

Bender began coaching

Continued on Page 2



Bruce Bender stands in front of his club's awards and certificates. Photo by Jace Martin

judo — which can be described as a mixture of martial arts and wrestling — in the late '70s at IWU. He took a hiatus from the sport in the '80s, but when his grandson Gabriel Brown was six or seven years old, Bender started up his own club. Brown said, "The story is that I asked him to start the club for me and then next thing you know, I'm doing a lifetime full of judo. I kept asking, kept asking, and one day he just decided to do it and he's been doing it for free ever since."

Brown, who is 30 now, is one of the top-ranked players in the Midwest. He said that his grandfather has played a major role in his life even beyond judo. "Everything: mentorship, the way I talk, the way I perceive things. I mean, he is who I am. He is just a stand up guy. I've never met somebody quite as selfless as him. If it wasn't for Bruce starting the judo club, I'm not real sure where I would have been or how I would have turned out."

The club has had several homes through the years including the Coliseum,

the Community School of the Arts, the PAL Club and now the YMCA. The classes are for anyone six years and older.

Watching youngsters grow up has been Bender's favorite part of coaching the sport. "I like dealing with the children," he said. "I like turning children and young adults out to be good respectable citizens. When we get them, we keep them for seven, eight, ten years. They're with me till they go to college and a lot of them come back to play. And so that's what I like most about it."

Yocum said her dad's humility and the support of his wife, Nancy, have made the judo program so successful. "Dad has never asked for anything other than his kids and parents respect each other and have a good time," Yocum said. "It just really warms my heart to be able to acknowledge his service and honestly, the service of Nancy. She's been right beside him this whole time and supported the judo program in so many ways."

Nowadays, Bender mainly coaches the older

players and lets one of his partners, Robin Duffy, coach the younger kids. As for the future, Bender has no plans to quit the sport he loves. "You'll find me dead out there," said Bender, motioning to the mats. "One of these days, I'm sure I will be. I've got no plans of going anywhere. As long as I have kids who really want to compete and do this, then I'll stay."



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