

A hometown sensei in his spare time

Burnsville resident runs aikido dojo in hometown

MIKE SHAUGHNESSY • SUN NEWSPAPERS

If you referred to Phil Johnson as a *sensei*, he might get a good laugh out of it.

That's if you're using Hollywood's interpretation of a martial arts instructor. You know, the guru who dispenses wisdom the student doesn't understand until, suddenly and magically, it all makes sense at the end of the film.

Johnson is a guy with a job and a young family — and a second-degree black belt in aikido, a Japanese martial art that focuses on throws rather than punches and kicks. For the last year, he has operated his own *dojo* (training facility) in an office park not far from Burnsville High School.

Johnson has studied aikido since 1992, when he was a college student in Duluth. He has taught the martial art the last several years and wants to introduce it to a wider audience in his hometown.

Johnson and several other instructors at the Enso Aikido Dojo teach a little more than 30 students, including a half-dozen children. Johnson said he'd like to expose the art to more teenagers.

"I'm proud that I haven't had a student leave," said Johnson, whose day job is as a computer systems architect. "If I

never have another student beyond the ones I already have, I'm fine. I can pay the rent. But we're here about four days a week, and we'd like to be here seven days a week."

Aikido dates to the 1930s and was developed by Morihei Ueshiba (also known as "O Sensei"). The focus is on individual development; unlike other martial arts, competition is de-emphasized.

"I kind of followed the Hollywood stars," Johnson said. "Like any college kid, you wanted to do the things Steven Seagal did."

Seagal also holds an aikido black belt and was an aikido instructor in Japan before starting his film career.

O Sensei's students spread aikido throughout the world, with each having a slightly different interpretation of the art.

"I've had a number of teachers, from Duluth to Hudson [Wis.] to Texas," Johnson said. "I also went to Japan two years ago and visited the world headquarters for aikido. It's like finding a diet that fits you. If you're not losing weight with one diet, you adjust."

Much of youth sports are centered on competition, but that is not aikido's way. Most schools do not train their students for competition. It is not one of the martial arts featured in the Olympics.

Johnson said he doesn't have a prob-

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Phil Johnson (left) of Burnsville and Tristan Chermack of Bloomington demonstrate throws at Johnson's aikido dojo in Burnsville.

Aikido

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lem with competition, but added that many people – children and adults – see enough of it in their daily lives. He said part of aikido's attraction is that students can take ownership of their own development.

As for the *sensei's* role, "the approach to teaching kids is different than it is for adults," Johnson said. "With adults, it's mainly about giving them the tools to improve. With kids, you have to give them a little more direction. That's a challenge."

The point of aikido is to use the energy of opponents to throw them away from you. Students also can work with props such as swords, staffs and sticks.

A heavy bag hangs in the corner of the Enso Aikido Dojo. "We do punches and kicks, but it's for the sole purpose of learning to defend against it," Johnson said.

With instruction available in a number of martial arts styles in the Twin Cities, Johnson said he knows students have choices. His recommendation, regardless of the martial art they eventually choose:

"They should see if the program matches their goals, see if it's a fit. And they should observe the attitude of the students, whether they're laughing, smiling and having a good time."

(The Enso Aikido Dojo will have an open house, including demonstrations of martial arts techniques, and opportunities for audience participation, 1-4 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 21, at its Burnsville location, 12205 Wood Lake Drive. For more information, call 952-393-9371.)