



# Reading, Writing and Fair Fighting in the Oakland Ghetto

by Jim Hoffman

East Oakland, California is not a nice place to visit and you wouldn't want to live there. Most of what is bad about America is worse in East Oakland and most of what is good about America isn't there at all. In East Oakland, unemployment, disease, illiteracy, crime, poverty and mortality are all on the heavy side of the national averages.

There are few parks. For recreation there is only the street, a harsh terrain cluttered with the debris of a cruel and wasteful era—rows of deserted storefronts, shattered glass, broken people.

Hardly the ideal environment for raising children. Much less a place where you would expect to find a school designed as a model of quality educa-





FEW PARKS break up East Oakland's poverty, crime dominated terrain, so for recreation as well as sheer self-defense, Intercommunal Youth Institute's martial arts program provides physical education and internal discipline for youngsters.

tion for all communities—the poor and the privileged, the black and the white. But thanks to a determined and courageous group of people, the school exists. In fact, it thrives, a beacon of hope in a wasteland of human and material desolation.

The Intercommunal Youth Institute was founded in 1971 by the Black Panther Party, which was seeking an alternative to the inferior education being given their children by the Oakland Public Schools. In 1973, the school became legally independent and is now community-based, drawing most of its enrollment from outside Panther families. In each of the four years since its birth, the school has added more students and more programs, always striving to create a model for those seeking an alternative to the deteriorating institution known as the public school. This year, the Intercommunal Youth Institute added martial arts to the curriculum for all its students.

While the martial arts program is still young, it is rapidly becoming a favorite

of school officials, parents and students. It is an ideal program for the school in many ways. For one thing, the school doesn't have a lot of money for physical education. Martial arts, unlike many sports, require no special playing field and, except for sparring gear, no special equipment. At a time when many US school systems are cancelling sports programs for lack of cash, this is an important consideration.

Another reason the school offers martial arts is the immediate practical value of knowing self-defense. As instructor Steve McCutchen tells his students, "You can walk around the corner from here and get chased home. There will be many times when you will have to fight or run. What you will learn here is that 'fight or run' doesn't mean the end of the world."

But perhaps the most important reason for teaching martial arts at the Intercommunal Youth Institute is the philosophy of the school itself. Unlike traditional public schools where "discipline" means a set of rules, punishments

and rewards that are imposed by teachers and authority figures, the Institute emphasizes *internal* discipline. The children progress at their own rate, and it is not uncommon for a seven-year-old student to learn math with 10-year-olds and reading with five-year-olds. Because the children are not automatically advanced from year to year, they must develop the desire and discipline to learn within themselves.

Martial arts instruction harmonizes well with this focus on internal discipline, according to the school's director Ericka Huggins. "All the children admire Bruce Lee," Ericka says. "We want to show them that what went into Bruce Lee was a lot of hard, hard work, and that every human being needs internal discipline."

This approach appears to be contributing to the success of the school, which is rapidly achieving the kind of local notoriety that often prefigures bigger things. "Children beg to come here," Ericka says. "You should see them some days. It's so sad. They're supposed to be in their own schools, but they come here and peek into the classroom doors. Some come here just to go up to our library and read."

There is much for public school children to envy at the Institute. Unlike the public school ratio of 40 students to one instructor, the Institute has 20 instructors for its 100 children. In addition to the regular curriculum, the school provides instruction in three languages, art, music, drama and dance. The social studies class is specially designed to give the children—all blacks and Mexican-Americans—an idea of their cultural heritage and of the realities that face them in contemporary society. In contrast to public school instruction, which consists mainly of memorization and drilling, the school encourages the children to express themselves freely, to explore, and to question the assumptions of what they are learning, as children are naturally inclined to do.

This combination has produced some notable successes. "We have children here who were labelled hyperactive, educable retardates and all kind of crazy things," Ericka says. "They come here and they just blossom into the flowers that they really are."

All this is accomplished without charging tuition and without financial support from government. A "strong parents' group" contributes \$15 per month each, but this would not even cover the cost of salaries, unless many of the teachers worked for nothing, purely out of their sense of dedication and their knowledge that they are providing the only hope these children

have. Says Ericka, "We would do anything, short of something criminal, to make this school survive."

One of the instructors who works without pay is 25-year-old martial arts teacher Steve McCutchen. Soon to be a red belt in tae kwon do (the equivalent of a brown belt in karate), Steve teaches 10 sessions a week at the school, and two sessions a week after school. Last year Steve was a science teacher. When the school decided to inaugurate a physical education program, he volunteered himself as a martial arts instructor.

Steve's class was an immediate success. "It's just beautiful to see children have this much interest in strengthening their bodies," Ericka comments. "Children don't know about discipline, but it's something they need. This is a way of helping them understand it through something they really like."

"Steve is a good teacher, too," she continues. "He's teaching them how to be responsible about karate, how to conduct themselves. We had a problem at first, people running around kicking at each other. But Steve sets an example of control. You never see him running around sidekicking people."

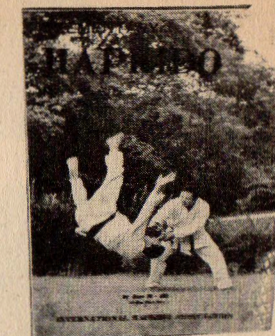
The class proved so popular that the school soon added an after hours program for young adults. The young adult program is one of many after hours programs offered at the school, known locally as the Learning Center. Like the other after hours programs, it gives community youth an opportunity to learn without being enrolled officially. "The Learning Center is always full to the brim with kids," Ericka says. "This building is the only thing in East Oakland where kids can come and feel free to do whatever they want."

Students in the young adult program tend to be public school students who are, on the average, a little older than the age group (up to about 13) served by the Institute. Many say they joined the class after street fights with bigger opponents. Most say they will stay with martial arts until they earn a black belt.

The program is immensely beneficial to the two dozen or so young men who participate. "Steve has what is necessary to make the kids want to have discipline, to learn," says Ericka. "I mean, look, the kids he works with would be robbing stores if they weren't here, not because they're innate criminals, but because there's nothing to do—not just in East Oakland but in this whole country—for black and poor children. Nothing."

The after-hours program is still growing. In the near future, it will be

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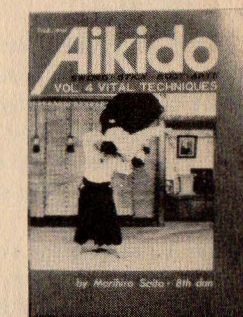


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