

Bill Zirinsky: As you look back on it now, what interests in your childhood foretold your becoming a martial arts instructor?

Rob Byas: Funny enough, I've always known. My older sisters tell everyone to this day that I announced it at the sagely age of 7. I used to watch Saturday karate movie marathons on television. My friends and I would immediately proceed outside where we would reenact the fight scenes and battles. (Laughs) Boy, were those epic! I used to read all the ninja books and magazines from the 80's ninja boom. I saved one year's allowance to purchase an "authentic" ninja uniform when I was 10. I practiced postures from books religiously, and taught myself how to cartwheel, summersault, and back flip. I climbed up and over everything I could find.

Bill Zirinsky: Tell us about your path to opening up the Ann Arbor College of Martial Arts.

Rob Byas: I began training 17 years ago. In 1999, I opened a video game store in Hamtramck as a way to help kids stay off of the streets, and provide them a safe, uplifting environment. I built a training gym in the store. Neighborhood kids watched me train and enthusiastically asked questions. I began instructing a few of them. One student was accepted to U of M and wanted to continue training. I regularly commuted to Ann Arbor to teach at another facility, so I agreed to come on Sundays to work with him. We grew to become the largest martial arts organization on the campus. Several senior students graduated college and petitioned me to open a commercial school with them.

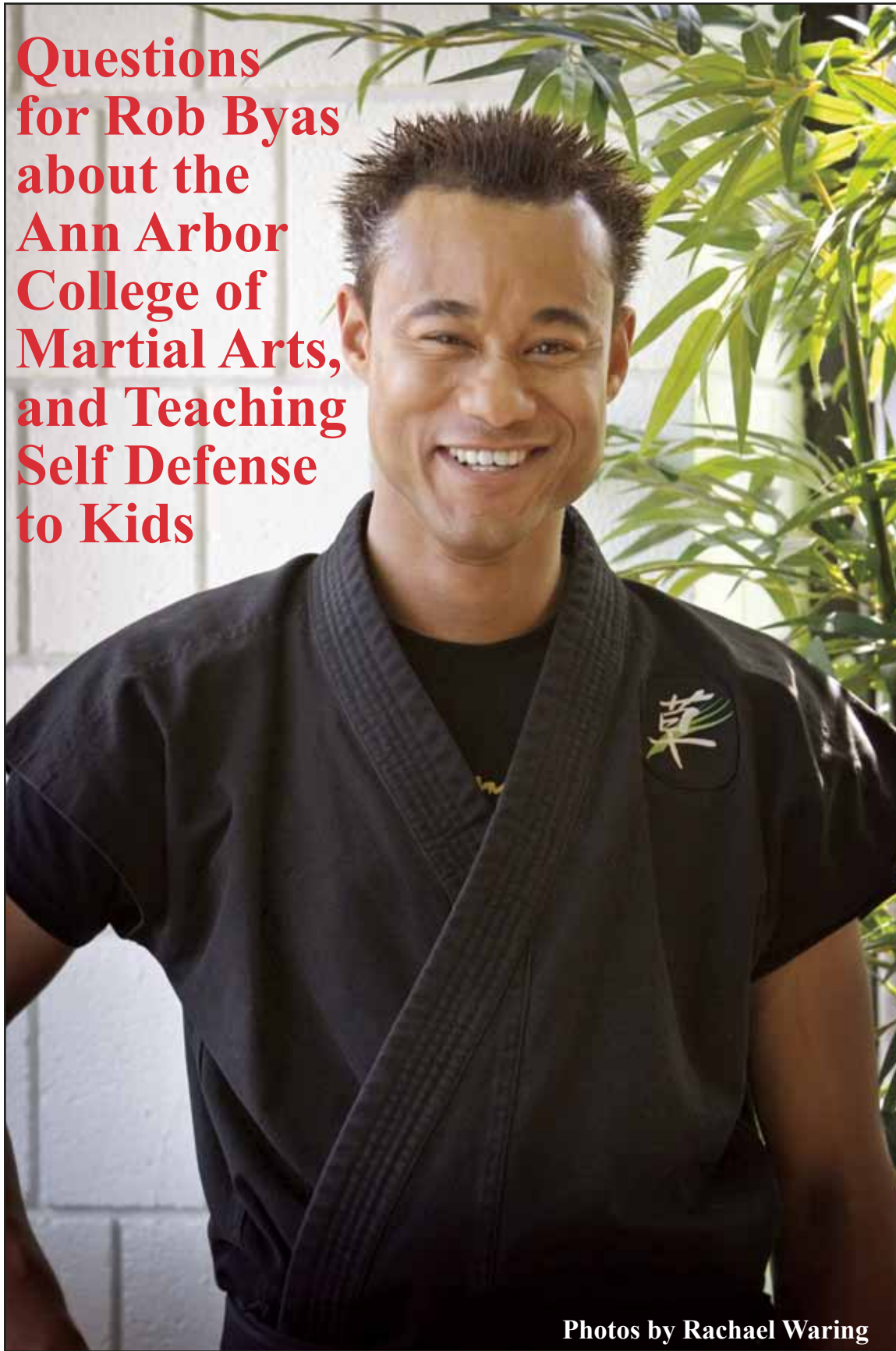
BZ: How long has the Ann Arbor College of Martial Arts been in business, and how is it going? And tell us a bit about your partners, as well.

Rob Byas: Almost two years and we're exploding! Ann Arbor has been waiting a long time for a martial arts school that actually teaches self defense. I have three partners, one of whom runs the daily operations of the school with me.

BZ: I believe you mentioned to me that Ninpo Taijutsu was the form of martial arts practiced at the Ann Arbor College. Please tell us about this form of martial arts.

Rob Byas: You are correct. The art originated in Japan and has a 900 year legacy of battle tested philosophies and techniques of self protection. It encompasses both Samurai and Ninja disciplines. Comprehensive in nature, it covers all aspects of self defense -- armed, unarmed, multiple attackers, stand up defense, ground defense, and psychological. The focus is on efficient, effective, intelligent, and practical methods of self protection and life skills. We practice and teach Godai Goshin Taijutsu, a

Questions for Rob Byas about the Ann Arbor College of Martial Arts, and Teaching Self Defense to Kids



Photos by Rachael Waring

Rob Byas of the Ann Arbor College of Martial Arts, located on South Industrial. Rob and his partners started the Ann Arbor College two years ago, and he says that business is exploding. For more information, check out their website at: www.A2CoMA.com or call 734-913-6000.

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contemporary system of self protection based on these time tested methods.

BZ: You mentioned that your form is the parent martial art for a lot of other Japanese martial arts. Can you tell us a bit about that?

Rob Byas: Over the last two centuries, the Samurai and Ninja warrior arts were segmented into specialties. However, they all have common sources. Aikido for example, is derived from Aikijutsu, which comes from Jutaijutsu; a core component of Ninpo Taijutsu. Likewise, Judo is from Jujutsu, also from Jutaijutsu.

What hopes or concerns bring parents to your martial arts studio...what are they seeking for their kids?

Rob Byas: Parents want practical martial art for their kids that will not advocate violence and aggression, yet prepares them to appropriately address assault scenarios. Some enroll their kids to develop focus, discipline, confidence, respect and physical fitness, academic tutoring, and exposure to outstanding role models that provide 'Living Examples'.

Tell us a bit about the philosophical underpinnings of your approach to martial arts.

Rob Byas: We use a model called "Godai" which means "5 great elements". The elements are Earth, Water, Fire, Wind and Void. They are representations of mental and physical states of being. Form without function is fatally flawed, so we practice responses to assault scenarios as opposed to punching and kicking at the air for points or trophies. We advocate escape and evasion as the best solution with practical, direct, effective physical defense when necessary. One won't always be the biggest, fastest or strongest in a fight. Consequently, superior athleticism is not the basis of our techniques. We utilize distancing, timing, bone alignment and an attacker's momentum to our advantage to escape harm.

You said to me that "self defense begins with defense against self." Please explain.

Rob Byas: Over time we develop habits that make us vulnerable to dangers in various guises. If we fail to practice moderation for example, we develop health issues, financial troubles, chaotic relationships, etc. By diminishing the frequency and presence of negative habits in our lives, we are in fact practicing self defense.

Tell us about the role of self defense vis-à-vis the sport/competition aspects and the self improvement aspects of martial arts?

Rob Byas: Martial Arts exist for the purpose of self defense, first and foremost. By default and design, self improvement dovetails into this imperative. Sport and

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competition should always be tertiary to the other two. Unfortunately, many sports centered martial arts schools purport themselves as self defense focused, and it is both a deception and a disservice to their students and clients that come to learn self defense. There are no rules of engagement when your life, health and safety are in jeopardy; you do what you must to make it home safely. I wish more consumers were educated on the differences, and that more school owners were forthcoming about the true nature of their programs.

How does your martial arts program help kids in “tempering or mastering oneself,” to use your words?

Rob Byas: This relates back to “self defense begins with defense against self.” We identify and cultivate areas of proficiency and potential. We conversely strive to diminish what’s lacking, dangerous or destructive within kids. We set them on paths of positive growth and success.

You said to me that kids in martial arts programs are “investing in their future.” What are the social, academic, and developmental advantages that a kid in your program may receive? What’s unique about your children-specific programming?

Rob Byas: Our kids benefit from a culturally diverse family oriented environment, a highly educated and motivating staff willing to serve as academic tutors, mentors and life coaches, and a home away from home. We are unique in that we can bridge the gap between parental authorities and youthful peers, in a positive, productive and functional way. We “get” young people.

How does your program evolve as kids get older?

Rob Byas: As children mature, we build on their motor and cognitive abilities. For example, the hand/eye coordination games played in our Tigers’ program are the basis of evasion skills in our Dragons’ program. The evasion skills of the Dragons coupled with vocalization drills form the foundation of our anti-bullying/anti-predator lessons of the Juniors’ curriculum.

How old are your own children, and have they trained in the martial arts?

Rob Byas: I have two children. My daughter is 18 and in college. My son is 15 and attends Skyline High. Both train with me.

You said to me that martial arts instructors are ‘living examples’...and they must hold themselves to a high standard. Please explain the words ‘sifu’ and ‘sensei’.

Rob Byas: “Sifu” is Chinese and means both teacher and honorary father. “Sensei” is



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Japanese and is often thought to mean teacher but actually means, “One who comes before”. Neither is to be self titled, they are bestowed by students to those deemed worthy. My students have chosen to call me Sensei, as I am travelling the path to self mastery ahead of them. In this way, we are living examples to all those that come after us.

You mentioned to me that “we really suggest finding joy in everything we do as a sustainable fuel to get through it.” Can you elaborate on the essence of that, as a closing thought?

Rob Byas: If one can find some measure of joy in every task, no matter how much one may dislike it, one can endure and persevere to its completion. The “Nin” in Ninpo Taijutsu means “To endure and persevere”.

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Ross Winkler (left) and Rob Byas (right) are partners in running the daily operations of the Ann Arbor College of Martial Arts.

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