

Seeds and swords

Community garden hosts after-school dance program

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SEEDS — South Eastern Efforts Developing Sustainable Spaces — has been known for its community gardening and youth education since 1994.

But the students involved in the SEEDS after-school program will be learning more than nature and gardening in the months to come.

Youth educator Thaddeus Bennett is bringing Chinese mixed martial arts choreography to his students.

“1... and a 2... and a 3... and a 4...” chants Bennett as his students wave wooden swords together in one motion.

Bennett has been working with SEEDS for 10 years.

He teaches students everything from gardening, to unique animals across North Carolina, to mixed martial arts.

Bennett’s introduction to dance at SEEDS is new to his students, but his dance background goes back to 1981.

“Chuck Davis is who really got me interested in dance,” Bennett said.

Davis is one of the founders of the African American Dance Ensemble. When he was younger, he was a cheerleader.

Bennett also cheered in high school but only wanted to do the “cool acrobatic stuff.” Bennett lacked the flexibility and control that Davis had, which enabled him to do acrobatics.

“Chuck was this big ol’ guy, but could move so fast and delicately. I wanted that in my acrobats and martial (artists),” Bennett said.

Davis opened Bennett’s eyes to dance, and together they started the African American Dance Ensemble in 1984.

Since then, Bennett has traveled across the nation performing. He spent a year teaching dance from all over the world at the American Dance Festival.

“I got to train kids from Japan, Germany, Italy — everywhere. That experience showed me how to teach,” Bennett said.

Bennett’s teaching has evolved to help kids learn about gardening, preservation of land, wildlife, martial arts and dance in the same setting.

“To teach kids, you have to ‘edu-tain’ them,” Bennett said.

“Edutain” is a word Bennett learned from Davis.

“It’s hard to learn when the educator is boring,” Bennett said. “So you have to educate and entertain at the same time.”

Now he wants to bring his experience of dance to the youth active in the SEEDS after-school program.

“That feeling of choreography in front of an audience is what I want to develop,” Bennett said.

Bennett believes choreography teaches more than flexibility and agility.

“Relaxation is the key to everything: discipline, focus and strength,” Bennett said. “That’s what I try to teach them.”

The class is intense and Bennett said many kids end up dropping out of it.

For 45 minutes without a break, the kids listen to instructions on how to draw swords, hold postures and maintain focus. If they lose focus or start laughing, Bennett calls them out.

“Most guys drop out cause it’s too hard or they don’t want to do the work,” Bennett said. “Right now they look like little people with little swords. I want them to look like strong people with big swords.”

Third-grader Sender Martinez has

stuck with the mixed martial arts classes for over one year.

“I want to be strong like the fighters in the movies,” Martinez said.

Bennett said Martinez has learned a lot in the time he has been here.

“When Sender started coming here, he never listened to me. He would always get in trouble and didn’t want to learn anything,” Bennett said. “Now he is our best fighter and is becoming our best dancer.”

Bennett is preparing his class for an end-of-semester performance in late May called “The Swords and Birds.” To prepare for the show, the students will be training their martial arts abilities and applying them in a uniform dance.

Bennett is teaching them the art of using a weapon as an instrument of dance in the performance. However, “The Swords and Birds” will be about more than dance.

“This semester we will be learning about some of the thousands of species of birds that exist,” Bennett said.

Bennett and his students have started to set up interactive display tables about birds. He likes to test his students on the facts these tables offer.

He sits the kids down and quizzes them to see what they have been learning throughout the week.

By May, the kids will learn about hundreds of birds and perform a uniform dance together while learning other life lessons along the way.



Christopher Castillo lunges forward with his sword after letting out a loud “HI-YA!” at the SEEDS after-school program. (Staff photo by Cole McCauley)