

A Cane is More Than a Crutch

A VFW Life member and Vietnam veteran with a background in mixed martial arts mastered Cane-Fu and now teaches it to veterans for free

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Watching his aging World War II veteran father neglect his cane because it made him appear “vulnerable” in public, VFW Life member Tom Ashmore set off on a journey that led him to Cane-Fu.

With an extensive martial arts background dating back to formal training in judo at 14 years old, Ashmore, 78, contacted Grand Master Mark Shuey, a U.S. Martial Arts Hall of Fame inductee who created the American Cane System.

The system, developed for seniors and people older than 40 in all physical conditions, appealed to Ashmore. He believed that using a cane for exercise and self-defense could get his father to appreciate his own.

“I started training with Grand Master Shuey a decade ago and worked my way up, going through all the different belts,” said Ashmore, a Purple Heart recipient who deployed in 1966 with the 2nd Bn., 4th Marines to Vietnam. “Then as I got more involved in teaching my father, I figured I’d help others like me. It became a hobby of love more than anything else.”

A Life member of VFW Post 4639 in Williamsburg, Virginia, and a retired police officer, Ashmore and his wife created Cane Loyalty, a free program that has since taught Cane-Fu to more than 2,000 veterans in and around Virginia.

He describes Cane-Fu as an “innovative” way for veterans to stay active and practice self-defense tactics.

“Sadly, physical attacks on seniors and the disabled have increased about 70 percent in the last few years,” said Ashmore, whose martial arts background includes learning under several masters while deployed to Japan, as well as mastering Arnis, the national martial arts of the Philippines that uses stick, knife and open hand fighting.

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“We went with Cane Loyalty because if you are loyal to your cane, it will be loyal to you,” Ashmore added. “It’s like taking care of your weapon in combat. When you need it, it is there.”

Ashmore’s Cane Loyalty program offers seminars with hands-on training, providing each veteran with a free hardwood cane manufactured by Cane Masters in Florida. While open to traveling for seminars, most of Ashmore’s classes are held at the War Memorial Cultural Arts & Community Center in his hometown of Powhatan, Virginia.

“I’ve been traveling around Virginia, but as I get older, I have traveled less,” Ashmore said. “I do classes at VFW Posts and Purple Heart chapters around the area now. No veteran has ever paid for a class, either.”

For his efforts in teaching Cane-Fu to veterans, Ashmore has received much recognition over the years. Last year, the Vietnam veteran was honored with a permanent mural and Quilt of Honor at the VA hospital in Richmond, Virginia, as well as an award from the Richmond chapter of The Military Order of the Purple Heart for his continuous work in teaching veterans that a cane is more than a crutch.

“The cane can become your personal gym so you can get stronger to live longer,” Ashmore said. “You can use your cane to enhance your balance, increase your flexibility and defend yourself and others if needed. Learning these movements also builds confidence, and it can alleviate depression by giving them something to focus on.”

Through Cane Loyalty, Ashmore has recently developed new training programs for veterans who are wheelchair bound, as well as programs dedicated to caregivers and those missing a hand or arm.

“Caregivers also benefit greatly from the strength building and flexibility training as well as the defense option,” Ashmore said. “The caregiver and the veteran can practice together for added camaraderie.”

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