

# Union-Tribune Archives

## Getting her kicks: Poway teacher's after-school program combines karate, character education and fundraising

**Author(s):** Linda Lou STAFF WRITER **Date:** April 12, 2009 **Section:** ZONE

Nay Flinn knows what it's like to constantly maintain a balancing act. She's a teacher, wife and soccer mom who also coaches her daughters' team.

That's why Flinn never planned to be a fundraiser for the Poway Unified School District, where she works. But an opportunity to teach something that's dear to her came along a few years ago and captured her imagination.

Since 2006, Flinn, 39, has been teaching an after-school program that combines **karate** and character education at a few elementary campuses per school year. All of the fees that parents pay for the three-week class are donated to the schools. Flinn, who has two young daughters, doesn't see a penny of it.

"People always ask, 'What's the catch?'" Flinn said. "There is no catch. This is what I try to teach my kids every day. This is what I teach my daughters every day."

By "this," she means character and doing the right thing even when no one's watching.

Poway Unified uses Character Counts! -- a nationwide character-education program that features six pillars: caring, respect, trustworthiness, fairness, responsibility and citizenship. Values emphasized by **karate** include integrity, perseverance and self-control.

"It's so extremely gratifying," Flinn said of her involvement. "I get to go from school to school, spreading what I believe in. My daughters get to see me as a school leader. I am a model for them (for) what good citizens do."

Flinn, who has a second-degree black belt in taekwondo, has taught the program at a few campuses. She has offered it at her own school, Canyon View Elementary, but also at Turtleback, Adobe Bluffs, Shoal Creek and Willow Grove elementary schools. She has earned the schools about \$26,000 total.

For the 2009-10 school year, Flinn is booked at Deer Canyon, Stone Ranch and Canyon View elementary schools. The program costs \$69 per child.

Zoom Duong, the PTA president at Willow Grove, had to book Flinn a year in advance for the **Life Lessons**/Character Counts! class that wrapped up last month.

"It's a win for both the students and the PTA via the school," said Duong, whose daughter took the class. "It's really incredible. As a parent, I am very happy about what the program offers to my daughter -- that character counts. (Flinn) teaches about the strength on the inside and the outside."

Each of the six classes lasts about 45 minutes. The first half of each class focuses on one of the six pillars of character, or the inner strengths. The second half uses **karate** techniques to build physical strength.

Skits with **lessons** about character are performed by adult volunteers who help Flinn and by her daughters, Taylor, 10, and Reese, 8. It's their community service, Flinn said.

Recently, the girls and their friend McKenna Stamp, 11, acted out a jump-roping skit onstage, demonstrating the effects of a negative and positive attitude. The 50 or so children in the class spotted the difference right away.

In the first scenario, the girl who had problems jumping kept blaming the two who were turning the rope. She also threatened to quit, which meant the other girls would lose their chances to jump.

Then the class saw the same girl, still struggling with jumping rope but not complaining. She was trying harder now, and agreed to take her turn holding the rope. The **lesson** was about perseverance and fairness.

While teaching the class, Flinn is nonstop energy. She's on the stage, running around on the floor, exaggerating her gestures to captivate students. Often, she's yelling at the top of her lungs, even though she uses a microphone. By the end, she's a little hoarse.

That's really her personality, said Flinn, who teaches kindergarten.

"I feel like it's my gift being silly and funny," she said. "Through this, it makes for really powerful teaching. They want to laugh and learn at the same time. I have a blast teaching this."

Flinn's volunteers -- Michelle Stamp, Kevin Elliott, Lori Calabrese and Schuyler Melby -- are all parents of Poway Unified students, and all practice martial arts at **Family Karate** in Rancho Peñasquitos. They hold pads and other equipment for

students to block, strike with their palms and kick.

**Family Karate**, known for its community fundraisers, awards white belts to children who complete Flinn's program.

Flinn and her daughters have been taking classes at the business for years. Flinn, who has always been athletic, got involved in **karate** when Taylor was 3. She was looking for an activity they could do together that would build self-esteem.

In 2004, after watching a **karate** fundraiser that benefited her school, Flinn had a brainstorm: Why not combine **karate** with character building?

Flinn, who has taught for 15 years, became trained in Character Counts! in 2005 and started offering her program in 2006. She and Stamp, also a Poway Unified teacher, create the skits.

To gain more credibility with parents, Flinn earned an instructor's certificate from the World Martial Arts Ranking Association in 2007.

With the state's economic crisis affecting school budgets, Flinn is even more in demand. She said the San Diego Unified School District recently called her and that a middle school in Poway Unified is asking for her assistance.

"I can't change this huge budget crisis, but I can help raise thousands of dollars with volunteers," Flinn said.

In the past, schools spent the money Flinn helped raise on supplemental programs and equipment, such as a running track, materials for science projects or a path in a school garden, she said.

But this year, Adobe Bluffs bought school supplies and Shoal Creek spent it on paper and ink cartridges, Flinn said. Willow Grove, a new school, plans to use the money for PTA programs.

Flinn said that as much as she wants to help more schools, she has to limit her commitment to three per year to balance her obligations.

But Flinn is willing to train volunteers who want to expand her program. She is also telling her story for inspiration.

"I am hoping this article will spark another idea for someone else," she said.

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