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Mental and physical wellness



Brian Bonifas, the director of physical wellness for First Responders Foundation, introduced Gracie JiuJitsu Omaha, as part of the First Responders Foundation in November 2021. (Photos submitted)

By Randy M. Cauthron, Managing Editor

• **Local responders offered 2 focused days of resiliency training**

First Responders Foundation mission is “to serve and honor all our first responders, veterans and their families, build appreciation and respect for their work and enhance public safety.”

Tuesday and Thursday, the Omaha, Nebraska-based organization, will offer its services to regional first responders from 8-10 a.m. at Grace United Methodist Church in Spencer. This two-hour resiliency training enables participants to learn how to expend, recover, heal and replenish resiliency to maintain healthier lives and careers. This is critical training for all first responders, whether they are just beginning their career or have been in the trenches for several years.

“Our mission is to care for first responders and their families,” said Allen W. Batschelet, retired U.S. Army major general and CEO of First Responders Foundation based in Omaha. “It’s based on a military program to support mental and behavioral wellness, physical wellness, spiritual wellness and financial wellness.”

He continued, "It's a proven technique in the military. If you can keep those four pillars in your life strong, it will benefit you at work, at home and with family."

Over the last few months, First Responders Foundation has been working with Spencer Fire Chief John Conyn, Spencer Police Chief Mark Warburton, Clay County Sheriff Chris Raveling and others to bring this resiliency training to Clay County at no cost to first responders. The opportunity is available to first responders throughout the region.

Plans are to also offer other types of training, including possibly for spouses and those associated with first responders. At the request of the Spencer Fire and Rescue Department, we are looking at the option of providing some limited training on physical control and deescalation techniques provided by Gracie-certified jiu-jitsu trainers.

Until Batschelet moved to Spencer, he also served as the First Responders Foundation president, a role he assumed in 2017 after his retirement from service. It's a role he has a great deal of pride in and believes in the mission.

"There's no VA for first responders," he said, "we have a societal sense to take care of our veterans, but as a society we don't have that same sense of societal obligation to support them (responders). If you need to deal with trauma and stress in the work place, when you or I call 911, that first responder is going to be on top of their game."

Jason Workman, a licensed independent mental health practitioner, licensed alcohol and drug counselor, and a clinically certified trauma professional, will facilitate the resiliency training. He is the director of behavioral health at the First Responders Foundation, a law enforcement chaplain, Nebraska CISM team member and state trainer. Workman's experiences include previously serving as a firefighter/EMT in northern California, Child Protective Services, Nebraska Department of Correctional Services and Nebraska State Probation.

"I was taught from a young age to respect those in uniform, said Todd Sears, president of First Responders Foundation, and retired Omaha World-Herald president and publisher. "My grandpa was a World War 2 veteran and a big influence in teaching me what it meant to serve. While I'm not a veteran and don't have a First Responder background, being able to serve them in this role means a lot to me.

He added, "First responders experience trauma most of us will never know. They put themselves between us and danger on a regular basis. Our services are provided by culturally competent individuals who specialize in working with this group. Whether it's behavioral health and training or physical health and training, we provide tools necessary for first responders to be at their best." Sears stressed these jobs also take a toll on all members of the family. Because of that, programming and services that are aimed at reaching the entire family.

"On the behavioral side," he said, "we have a counselor that specializes in spouses and children of first responders. We also provide couples and family counseling.

Brian Bonifas, the director of physical wellness, will be the instructor for the “bully proof” education program for youth to learn how to de-escalate situations in school and so forth.

“I was a police officer before I retired to run the physical health and jiu-jitsu program,” Bonifas said.

“To be frank, I was in bad shape, mentally and physically from my career. The First Responders Foundation not only offered me a pathway to become physically healthy, but it was the first time I wasn’t put off by the idea of seeing a mental health professional. It’s difficult to imagine counselors or therapists who don’t specialize in first responders could actually understand what we go through. Bonifas said officially his program, Gracie JiuJitsu Omaha, became part of the First Responders Foundation in November 2021.

“2020 was a tough year for everyone, but police officers found themselves transformed from early heroes of the pandemic, to being hated with calls for defunding or outright elimination of police,” he said. “During that time, the First Responders Foundation was willing to let me try to build a program that would help officers improve the aspect of their job that had become the cause of so much division: Application of force.

Bonifas continued, “Because of the First Responders Foundation, I had a chance to bring my brothers and sisters in blue the art of jiu-jitsu. A solution to keep them safe, and meet the high expectation of reasonable use of force application by the public.”

A study out of Marietta, Georgia, found that jiu-jitsu-trained officers were 53% less likely to cause serious injury to a suspect during an arrest. Implementation of this training also resulted in a 48% reduction in the likelihood they would use force at all.

Bonifas is offering three days of the Gracie University proprietary Gracie JiuJitsu programs. The Gracie Combatives Program will be offered with specific arrest and control modifications for law enforcement. The Women’s Self Defense class empowers women specifically to address sexual assault and abduction prevention. The Gracie Bullyproof Program teaches kids strategy and self defense to deal with bullying.

Bully Proof allows children to learn the skills necessary to protect themselves and de-escalate situations with confidence in a nonviolent way. Likewise, Women Empowered focuses on teaching women the skills necessary to protect themselves with confidence. Gracie Combative's is the first step in learning the Gracie techniques and culture. Bonifas will share more. But the Gracie way is more than self defense.

“Jiu-jitsu has a role in keeping every member of the family safe,” he said. “Our programs adapt to each person and why they need.”

Sears was an active board member prior to joining the team.

“What I witnessed as a board member was a passionate group who were dedicated to the mission of serving this critically important part of our community,” he said. “I’ve always had a strong respect and admiration for first responders and veterans. When this opportunity arose, it was an easy decision. It is an opportunity to give back and to support those who protect us.”

The foundation also provides a service dog program as well as college scholarships for children of first responders.

Susie Buffett's Sherwood Foundation provides support for the foundation's efforts, and the Laiken Foundation, out of Council Bluffs, has provided grant funding the Resiliency Training specific program which will serve the regional responders.



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