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Getting their kicks

Nearly 200 feet participate in martial-arts center's fundraising event in Fitchburg

By Nick Mallard
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FITCHBURG — Since the age of 5, Fitchburg's Vinny Champa has practiced martial arts at Len Brassard's Family Martial Arts Center.

Now 12, Champa says he has learned much more than the art of self-defense from the center. He has also learned the valuable art of giving back.

Champa was among nearly 100 people to take part in the Family Martial Arts Center Annual Kick-A-Thon in Fitchburg on Sunday, joining others in completing 1,000 kicks each in the center's parking lot on Airport Road in Fitchburg. Participants gathered pledge donations with all the money being distributed to charity by Brassard and his son, also named Len.

"It feels good to be able to do something that helps people," said Champa, who helps feed the area homeless on a monthly basis. "Learning martial arts

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PHOTO / CHARLES STERNIAMOLO

From left, Anika Talwar, 11, of Lunenburg, Brigid Griffin, 10, of Ashby, and Katelyn Mosheer, 11, of Fitchburg, take part in Sunday's One Hundred Thousand Kicks at the Family Martial Arts Center in Fitchburg.

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Nearly 200 feet kick up a storm in martial-arts center's fundraiser

PHOTOS / CHARLES STERNIAMOLO

Conor Claflin, 12, of Leominster, exhibits his martial-arts skills Sunday at Family Martial Arts Center's One Thousand Kicks event, which raised money for local charities, including Special Olympics.

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has been fun, but I've learned to help other people, too."

Brassard, a clinical psychologist and martial-arts instructor, said he views his business as more than just a way for him to make money for his family.

"I wanted the studio to be more than just a martial-arts school," the older Brassard said. "I wanted to have community involvement. I wanted to do something to give back to the community."

"The only reason we're doing as well as we are is because we give back," the younger Brassard added. "We're not greedy. We don't treat this like a multimillion-dollar corporation. We want to give back to every one of the kids that help us and the community."

The Kick-A-Thon came close to reaching its goal of 100 participants this year, with rows of people performing sets of 25 to 50 kicks each at a time in increments until the goal of 1,000 was reached.

"We welcome anyone to come join us," the older Brassard said. "Parents, kids, anyone. It doesn't have to be just our students."

In addition to the group kicking effort, the day's event featured a short demonstration put together by instructors and experienced students, including Champa.

The younger Brassard said teaching the pupils at FMAC to be charitable is just as important as learning the martial-arts techniques taught there.

"A lot of martial-arts places will have trophies of what they accomplish," he said. "Seeing these kids learn to help and be charitable ... those are our trophies."

The school started the Kick-A-Thon in the early 1990s as a way to spread good will to the surrounding communities and to help groups financially as well.

"We originally got involved with the Jerry Lewis telethons, so around each Labor Day weekend, we'd have our Kick-A-Thon, and the proceeds would go to 'Jerry's Kids,'" the older Brassard said. "In fact, in either 1992 or 1993, they invited us to Boston to be part of what they do, so that was pretty cool."

This year's event will benefit a handful of groups, and the idea of potentially starting a scholarship fund for some of the center's students has been tossed around, Brassard said, adding that many have attended the school since they were very young and have formed a family-type bond with everyone at the center.

"The first thing we're going to do is give a chunk of what comes in to the Special Olympics," he said. "And every year we have a food drive and participate in the Fitchburg police toy drive, so we're just going to take some of the money and go overboard this year. Two years ago, we raised around $6,000, so if it's anything like that this year we're going to be able to do a lot of cool stuff.

"We want to be able to do things throughout the year for the community," he added.

In addition to coming up with money for worthy charitable foundations, Brassard said one other outstanding footnote comes out of the event.

"When you say that a group has accomplished a tenth of a million kicks, that kind of puts everyone in awe," he said.

Len Brassard, owner and director of the Family Martial Arts Center in Fitchburg, uses a bullhorn to help his students keep the pace during Sunday's One Hundred Thousand Kicks.

Express condolences.

See the obituary section at

www.sentinelandenterprise.com

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