

In 1999, Dara Masi had a dream. Literally. A long-time supporter and recent Treasurer of the National Women's Martial Artists Federation (NWMAF), Dara was well aware of the challenges facing women martial artists and of the important work the NWMAF was doing to help women meet them. But, as an advanced practitioner, instructor, and school owner, she also recognized that others like her faced unique challenges and that no organization existed whose mission it was to address them. One night, Dara dreamed the answer. She would establish a new organization to support women like her so that, in her words*:

- Never again will a woman not have support to turn to when she is forced out of her school.
- Never again will a woman not have the resources available to aid her in starting a school.
- Never again will a woman not get support as an instructor or ways to learn how to be a better one.
- Never again will a woman be denied rank because she is a woman.

And so the Association of Women Martial Arts Instructors (AWMAI) was born. Not one to wait, Dara immediately called Jamie Zimron (forgetting that it was 3 hours earlier in California than the 7:00 a.m. it was in New York) to share her excitement. Before long, the rest of the Board of Directors was in place: Dara Masi as Executive Coordinator, Jamie Zimron as Rank Coordinator, Barbara Dickens as Financial Coordinator, Suzanne Pinnette as Administrative Coordinator, and Wasentha Young as Events Coordinator. At Special Training that year, Dara invited all interested women to meet during lunch one day and, standing on a table, pitched her idea to a cautious crowd. AWMAI, she explained, would be a sister organization to the NWMAF, concerned specifically with meeting the needs of advanced practitioners in search of advanced training and rank advancement; of fledgling or experienced instructors striving to become better teachers; and of prospective or long-time school owners striving to improve their businesses. Caution turned into enthusiasm as her vision took hold and the organization was off and running.

AWMAI held its first annual "Teaching the Teacher" event in February, 2000. Keeping true to Dara's second dream of "going someplace warm in January", members met in Austin Texas. Attended by some 40 women, the weekend included AWMAI's first rank promotions: Barbara Tyndall was promoted to 4th dan in Hakkoryu Ju Jitsu and Sue McAley was promoted to 3rd dan in Goju Shorei Karate. In February, 2001, the conference moved to Palm Springs, California, where members were treated to freezing temperatures in that desert oasis. The winter, 2002 training was cancelled because of the 9/11 tragedy, but the organization regrouped and, at the invitation of the NWMAF, hosted a special Pre-ST event. That was so successful that the practice of a winter camp (held subsequently at our beloved HoJo of Deerfield Beach) and a Pre-ST event

continued for several years. Eventually, though, winter event became large and complex enough to require the Board's undivided attention.

The years since 1999 have seen Board members serve and retire and new members take their place. The organization's membership has grown, and rank recognition and rank advancement has been awarded to an increasing number of phenomenal women martial artists. Classes at "Teaching the Teacher" continue to inspire with advanced training and workout sessions, classroom sessions and workshops on teaching and business strategies, and lots of time for networking, fellowship, and fun on the beach. And day by day, as we continue to spread the word about AWMAI, we bring Dara's dream closer to reality.

*Dara Masi, AWMAI Newsletter, Summer 2004.