

Sun Dragon Martial Arts fosters inclusive, empowered South Austin community

By Sarah Hernandez | 12:00 AM Jul 3, 2025 CDT



Sun Dragon Martial Arts and Self-Defense offers Seido karate and self-defense classes for all ages. (Courtesy Sun Dragon Martial Arts and Self-Defense)

Sun Dragon Martial Arts and Self-Defense, a nonprofit martial arts school in South Austin, is dedicated to building a community that values inclusivity and self-defense in all aspects of life.

How it started

Suzanne Pinette opened Sun Dragon on Riverside Drive in 1989 as a Kyokushin karate and self-defense school for women and children. The school moved to its current location in Westgate in 2008 under the direction of Joy Williamson, who trained under Pinette.

Today, Sun Dragon students of all ages study **Seido karate**, a style founded by Kaicho Tadashi Nakamura. He wanted to create a **style** that

was accessible to everyone and welcomed women, contrary to Kyokushin karate known for its aggressive training.



*Laura Hayden is the third executive director of the woman-founded Sun Dragon Martial Arts and Self-Defense.
(Courtesy Sun Dragon Martial Arts and Self-Defense)*

“I suppose we have moved away from being predominantly a self-defense school that also does martial arts,” said Sun Dragon Executive Director Laura Hayden. “We’re more of a Seido school, Seido karate, who thinks in terms of self-defense in everything, which is beautiful.”

About the program

Sun Dragon instructors aim to create a safe space for their students, training them to fight as well as be mindful of their experience and their partner's.

Graham Smith, Sun Dragon’s head instructor, said they also encourage failure as a learning experience.

“It's all the elements ... punching and kicking and working with partners that you'd find in a regular school, but we really layer in all these other things ... to, I think, enrich it and make it transferable to the rest of their lives and fun, but also challenging,” Smith said.



Seido karate teaches mindfulness and discipline along with the physical aspect of martial arts training. (Courtesy Sun Dragon Martial Arts and Self-Defense)

Sun Dragon also offers a **violence prevention program**, offering workshops and classes for children and adults. Coty DeLacretaz, the program coordinator, said classes touch on topics like gender- and identity-based violence, boundary setting, victim blaming and “empowerment self-defense.”

“Our self-defense isn't ... a long list of dos and don'ts,” DeLacretaz said. “It's really about what social structures promote violence or like, why there's differences and some groups are given more power than others or more respect than others, and how that inequality is where the violence happens.”

The impact

Hayden said that a big part of Sun Dragon's mission is to help students become the best person they can be.

"Every student has history, every student has a different perspective on things, and everyone's art can look different because everyone's experiences look different, and we acknowledge that, and it's such a huge part of our community," Hayden said.

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