

TV Celebrity Billy Blanks Evangelizes With Kicks and Jabs

He's the king of Tae-Bo exercise, and he's bold for God wherever his workout phenomenon takes him

It was a Monday night, and Billy Blanks came striding into his hugely popular Billy Blanks World Training Center a little earlier than usual. Seeing a downcast patron with a familiar face, he asked if anything was wrong. In the course of the conversation, he found out two things: The woman had Parkinson's disease, and she was a Muslim.

"I asked her, 'Do you have anything in your religion that you can gain healing from?'" Blanks told Charisma.

The woman said no.

"I told her I have something you can gain healing from. I asked her if she knew Jesus Christ."

It's typical Billy. Everywhere he goes and everyone he talks to—sick or well—gets a dose of Jesus, and these days the 46-year-old Blanks travels all over the world teaching Tae-Bo, a sort of karate exercise set to music.

Blanks was out of the country for the whole month of January working with U.S. Navy personnel on ships in Spain, Italy and Greece. He also taught a civilian group in Germany. But no matter where Tae-Bo takes him, Blanks boldly takes Jesus along.

So excited was a woman during an earlier trip to Germany that she ran up to Blanks after the class and thanked him for bringing God back into her life. The class proved meaningful to many of the 6,000 Germans in attendance, Blanks said.

“As we opened our eyes, people had their hands up to sky,” he said.

One of Blanks’ latest trips was to Sarajevo and Bosnia to teach physical fitness to Army troops. Many were bored, being so far away from home and without any hint of social life. A woman later told him that she had been trying for years to get her brother to receive Jesus and that he had accepted Him in one of Blanks’ Bosnia classes.

The world thinks Blanks is about Tae-Bo, or physical fitness, but Blanks is about something much bigger. A major part of his mission is spreading the Word of God.

His studio is a testament to his faith. Along the walls are signs that carry such scriptural messages as “Walk by Faith, Not by Sight”; “Let Brotherly Love Continue”; and “We Are More Than Conquerors.”

Such adornments may seem odd for a fitness studio, but Blanks doesn’t mind. “God has shown me how to talk to people and not turn them off,” he says.

His Billy Blanks World Training Center is located on Ventura Boulevard in Sherman Oaks, a middle- to upper middle-class enclave in Los Angeles’ sprawling San Fernando Valley. The studio is often frequented by famous Hollywood types, and like

the area itself, a large number of the patrons are Jews.

“God has given me a vehicle to go out and reach people, and there are millions of people into physical fitness,” he says.

“I’m one of the first physical fitness instructors to talk about faith and Jesus Christ. I ask, ‘What does God say about physical fitness?’ I tell people to base their training on what God says about them, and it will become a lifestyle, more than just a fad.”

Lest anyone get the feeling that all Blanks does is witness during his Tae-Bo classes, think again.

Blanks is a seventh-degree black belt and former world karate champion. Like any physical fitness studio, his is a sweatbox of mostly female bodies boxing and kicking their way to near-exhaustion, and loving the result. On a platform at the head of the class, either Blanks or one of his certified trainers continually shouts commands, as well as encouragement, to those straining either to get in shape or stay in shape.

Blanks’ worldwide contribution to physical fitness came about in 1989 when he perfected the concept of putting dance timing with karate movement to formulate a strenuous workout program. When the first Tae-Bo infomercial hit more than three years ago, Tae-Bo took off and hasn’t stopped since.

In February 1999, Time magazine reported that video sales had reached \$76 million. Sales to date top more than \$350 million on about 50 million units sold.

Blanks is continually perfecting Tae-Bo, or changing aspects of it to form a new program. The latest is a workout for men called Tae-Bo Flex, which has not yet made it to video.

Blanks and his wife, Gayle, credit the teachings of Frederick K.C. Price for taking their lives, as well as Tae-Bo, higher.

“I credit Dr. Price with everything, not only the biblical principles but the prosperity principles,” Blanks said. “He really doesn’t know what he’s done for me. Tae-Bo just blew up when I started helping people.”

-Stanley Williford in Los Angeles