

You Do What You Can...

By Ronda J. Sweet
Photos by John Esche

In 2003, Jeannie O'Connor discovered both skydiving and Tae Kwon Do. No one would blink an eye if Jeannie were 10, 16, 24, or maybe even 30. However, born March 13, 1935, that made her 68 when she began taking martial arts and 73 when she received her second-degree black belt from Beaven's Martial Arts in Claremore, Oklahoma.



Jeannie would do almost anything for her children or her grandchildren. So when her youngest grandchild wanted to go skydiving, she went along. When she felt her teenage grandson needed more discipline, she enrolled her grandson, her daughter Cookie and herself in a Tae Kwon Do school she had heard had a great reputation. When she arrived for her first class it suddenly dawned on her that some might think it odd that a 68-year-old would want to do this. Master Beaven just took it in stride and started Jeannie on her path. Sadly, grandson lasted only a month before he wanted to drop classes. Cookie however, was game to stay in class with her mother Jeannie.

Jeannie tells anyone who asks, "You do what you can." And what she can do is a lot. For those who think this is just a cute grandmother, known as Mamaw (mam-aw) to all, who is being spoon-fed a class and handed belts, think again. Mamaw teaches the white belt class twice a week, in addition to taking kickboxing twice a week (a killer class, been there, done that exact class), strength training twice a week and after completing a class which most would feel enough for the night, she takes the regular TKD class with the rest of the students at least Monday through Thursday and sometimes Saturdays.

In the early days, before Master Beaven and his wife presented Jeannie with a pair of TKD shoes, Jeannie broke a few toes. Most people would have quit class after the first, let alone the fourth, but she just taped them together and went on with class. Since getting her yellow belt, she has only missed two weeks and that was when she had a fall. Few students can claim that kind of record. Not to be considered a slacker, Cookie (age 55) keeps up with her mother and teaches a green belt class in addi-

tion to all their other class activities.

So is there anything that scares Ms. O'Connor? Testing. It makes her nervous. Testing with Master David Beaven is an all day affair with an egg timer and a lot of requirements. He cuts no one any slack, not even his mother, let alone Mamaw. She gets in and does it all. It took Jeannie awhile to get down the rolls, but with practice, she does them well. You do what you can and you keep on trying.

You would think this would be enough, but Jeannie mows her own lawn, cares for her menagerie of pets, including a 50-pound turtle left to her by her grandson, three dogs (one from her late son) and assorted others. She is helping the Beavens to move into their brand new building, a long time dream for the school. Neighbors comment that she does more than they could possibly do. In her spare time, she took the "Packed and Loaded School" to get her concealed weapons permit. Normally, it doesn't take as long as it did for Jeannie. It seems that in order to pass the class you have to be fingerprinted. Jeannie's fingers wouldn't hold the ink, so nine months later, she hiked to Oklahoma City and they soaked her fingers in ink to get the required prints. Can anyone say Indomitable Spirit or "Conviction of Ultimate Victory?"

So what is next for this lethal weapon granny? Jeannie plans on being a fifth-dan by the time she is 85. No one doubts she will succeed.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Ronda Sweet is a sixth-dan black belt currently living in New Orleans. For the last three years, she has been the elected Grassroots Director for USA Taekwondo's Board of Directors, with the last two years serving as Chairperson of the USAT Board.



A Girl Power Family

By Krystal Armstrong

When I started my training back in September of 2006 at Vianis Martial Arts Center in Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada, I would never have believed how much it would not only affect the physical aspect of my life, but also the spiritual and mental aspects. In fact, for me, Tae Kwon Do has done more for me mentally and spiritually than physically. It has changed the way I live my life.

Many challenges I faced during my training have made me more confident in my abilities and give me the strength to prevail at anything I do. As a mother of two daughters, what better role model could I be? That is why not only is TKD important for me, but for my two girls as well. I feel so fortunate that I can give them this opportunity that will not only enrich their lives but make them stronger and better people. They are getting an opportunity that I only wish that I had had when I was a child. In today's society where the family unit seems to be breaking down, Tae Kwon Do tightens our bond and gives us a different level to connect on.

My oldest daughter Hayleigh who is seven years old, started about two months after I did. I think she could see that Mom was having a lot of fun and wanted to try it out for herself. She is totally committed to her training and takes it seriously. For someone her age to have such qualities is very rare. TKD not only teaches her self-defense and keeps her active but she has a lot of fun too. She enjoys doing her forms and training with weapons. It makes her feel really good about herself to see what she can do. In May 2008, she entered her first tournament and competed in the point sparring event. She received a silver medal and wants to continue competing. To Hayleigh, Tae Kwon Do has made our family closer and nicer to one another. Her family is pretty special because of it.

My youngest daughter Emily, who is only four years old, started in August 2007. At first, like any four-year-old, she had some issues with focusing and listening to the instructors, but today I cannot believe how far she has come. She has incredible focus and discipline for a student her age. She is the only girl in her class and gives the boys a run for their money. What Emily likes most about Tae Kwon Do is the warm up drills and the

self-defense moves. She loves her instructors and she has a really good time in class. She also competed in her first tournament in May 2008 and received a gold medal in the point sparring event. She likes competing and wants to do it again sometime. Being able to do TKD like her mom and sister makes her feel that her family is very special since you don't see too many families doing something like this.

Tae Kwon Do has given our family a deeper connection and a real "team" morale. We help each other when practicing at home and are truly proud of one another. For any parent who is contemplating if TKD is for their child, trust me, the benefits are amazing. It is a great activity that focuses on all elements of their development—on a physical, mental and spiritual level. In order to have a stable house you need a strong foundation and what better way to do that for your children. Not too many activities can provide all that. Go Girl Power!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Besides being a busy mother of two, Krystal Armstrong currently runs her own Web site development company, Net Force Web Design, which provides high-quality, affordable solutions in Web creation. Check it out at netforceweb-design.com.



My College Essay

By Michael Sybert



Since the age of four, I have used the tenets of the Korean martial art Tae Kwon Do to help me through life's challenges, reach educational goals and attain important values. They have shown me that anything is possible with hard work and dedication.

Because of Perseverance and the Indomitable Spirit, I have excelled in academics. They have helped me to achieve induction into the National Honor Society. I've taken Advanced Placement courses and received recognition as a College Board Advanced Placement Scholar. These tenets have helped me to increase my work ethic and make me believe I can always do better.

The tenet of Self-Control has enabled me to resist the urge to "play" when work must be done. Also, at school I organized activities as a Spanish Club officer, taught elementary students about water protection and encouraged peers not to get involved with drugs. At the same time, I was training for a tournament in Las Vegas marking the 50th anniversary of Tae Kwon Do where I met and competed in front of grandmasters from all over the world.

Perseverance and Indomitable Spirit have enabled me to achieve the rank of third-degree black belt in Tae Kwon Do, a very demanding discipline. I have won numerous awards in both national and international competitions. As a 14-year-old, I had the honor of representing my country and winning a silver medal at the International Taekwon-Do Federation Junior World Championships in Italy. To support my school athletically, I competed in the long and triple jumps and relay events on the track team. New to this sport, I had to apply the tenets of Tae Kwon Do to catch up with teammates who had been participating for several years. I have been an integral part of our team's two undefeated seasons and district championship.

I have followed the tenets of Courtesy, Integrity and Modesty in my volunteer work: as a religious education aide, volunteer at a specialty-care center, member of a rock band performing for fundraisers, and as a martial artist breaking boards at events to benefit Hurricane Katrina victims and others in need. I was honored to

receive the Blessed Mother Teresa Award for my efforts at my church. Many of my achievements in the past 14 years—both in and out of school—have come as the result of using these tenets of Tae Kwon Do as my guide.

I hope to continue on that path as I begin my college years and study biology. I plan to pursue a career in medicine or bio-medical research because I am intrigued by the challenges that those fields offer. I hope that I might be able to help people or be involved in new discoveries beneficial to society. As a child, I already had an interest in how the body works and why sometimes it did not work properly. I always wondered how taking what I thought at the time was a simple pill could make someone better for some problems, but in other situations more intense measures such as surgery were needed. These childhood curiosities and my interest in medicine developed in my high school biology and anatomy classes and have intensified my desire to find out more about how the body works and how new methods and technologies can be developed to mend it.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Michael Sybert, of Valencia, Pennsylvania, is a graduate of Mars Area High School and has been admitted to The Pennsylvania State University Eberly College of Science. Michael holds black belts in three organizations: Young Brothers Tae Kwon Do Institute in Pittsburgh, United States Tae Kwon Do Center in Philadelphia and the International Taekwon-Do Federation. He trains under ninth-degree Grandmaster Young Bo Kong in Pittsburgh and at the Young Brothers location in Cranberry Township, Pa., under sixth-degree Master Robert Zang. Most recently, he won the black belt breaking competition at the 2008 U.S. Open and finished second in sparring and patterns at the 2008 Pittsburgh Karate Championships.

