

What Does Tae Kwon Do Mean to Me?

There are so many different answers I could give to this question. You see, Tae Kwon Do has meant different things to me throughout my life. To explore this question I have to look back on where I have come from and how this Korean Martial art, (that's literal meaning is The Way of the Fist and Foot), has affected me since I was very young. I have read that Tae Kwon Do's inauguration day was April 11th 1955. I almost share a birthday with Tae Kwon Do. I was born twenty years and one day later, on April 12th 1975. This likely means very little to others, but I like to think that it does mean something. You see my daughter (Amaya) who has recently achieved her first Dan, shares a birthday with me. She was born thirty years to the very day that I was born. In fact to the very minute I was born (at 5:47) thirty years later my wife happened to wake me, to let me know that this is the day that my daughter would be born. This factors in because I feel like I was reborn that day and that we both my daughter and I have such close of a birthday to Tae Kwon Do.

I am the son of Paul and Carol Langen. My father was a Truck driver and my Mother a school teacher. I was born in Great Bend Kansas. I was born with a defect with my left hand. (This is the first time in my life I have ever called it a defect). I have just my middle finger, ring finger and thumb on my left hand. My right hand is perfectly formed (although some might say I have fat fingers). Other than my left arm being a slight bit shorter than my right arm the rest of me is intact.

I remember, as a very young child hearing kids in the neighborhood calling me names and teasing me, and how I would let it get to me. It got me so angry and ready to fight any kid no matter how much older and bigger, if it was even mentioned. I figured that if I could show them how tough I was. They would know me by something other than the weird hand. I remember having bigger kids stand on my stomach for long periods of time. I remember jumping off of the high dive and landing sprawled out in belly buster form at the city pool. Me, crawling out of that pool, with the whole front of me as red as a tomato, caused by the sting and burn from hitting flat against the water so hard. No tears no wincing just a look of, I dare you to the other kids. That's how I could get them to not mention my hand. I got in a lot of fights. I earned a reputation. My older brother Joel and I would ride our bikes to his friend's house. There in his back yard, we would fist fight and wrestle other kids in the neighborhood. That didn't go on for long before our mom found out. We got in big trouble.

It was late summer 1981 I was six years old eating dinner outside on a Friday night at a little drive-in called Jan's Place on 24th & Washington in Great Bend. I looked up at a sign on a building because my brother, Joel kept nudging and pointing. I saw a sign painted with one guy doing a flying side kick and the other a side kick to counter. It was titled, THE GREAT BEND KARATE INSTITUTE. My eyes lit up.

Joel said, "We should do Karate".

We begged our mom between bights of hot dog to let us start Karate. She kept saying “no way, you boys just got in trouble for fighting’.

We didn’t give up hounding her and she gave in. My mom got up from the table and said, “You boys sit here and finish eating. I will go see what this place is all about”.

Off she went across the parking lot and into the building. I remember how my imagination went wild. Was mom going to be okay in there? My mind was going over all the things that might be going on in there while she was gone. Who was she talking to? I was worried about her?

A while longer my mom comes storming out pointing her finger at us boys. (At first, I thought we were in trouble again). Soon I could hear what she was saying as she came closer. “You Boys get your butts in there and meet this man, He’s going to get your attitude adjusted and get you into shape. Joel and I jumped up with excitement with a collective, “alright’. As we walked across the parking lot and as we got closer to the building, my excitement started giving way to fear on what we might encounter inside. That KARATE INSTITUTE sign got bigger and bigger as we got closer. I couldn’t turn back now. I had begged my mom to get this far. I was more afraid of my mother, than what the unknown was inside that building.

We stepped inside. There stood, in a dobak, the biggest black man with the biggest smile I had ever seen. Not what I had imagined. He had a Black belt and an Instructor Patch on his Dobak. He said, “Hi boys, my name is Wayman Johnson.” We told him our names. He told us that this is not Karate but Tae Kwon Do. We are to bow to the flags as we enter and exit, also that we were in for a treat because Friday night class is Friday fight night and class was getting ready to start. “You better get stretched out.” He said.

Joel and I worked out that first night and we even got to spar a little at the end of class. Wayman warned all the students not to use any of what we have learned unless our lives depended on it, and to never show off to anyone in school. He told us about the tenants of Tae Kwon Do and what each of them meant. My brother Joel and I were hooked. We continued going to the Great Bend Karate institute for years. I had learned the Palgwe form set up to Kroyo from Wayman and received my recommended Black Belt. Starting out I thought that Tae Kwon Do would be a way for me to intimidate other kids to keep them from teasing me about my hand. Though Tae Kwon Do, Wayman taught me to accept my hand and let people say whatever they wanted to say. By 1987 Tae Kwon Do had become a way to prove to myself that I could accomplish incredible things, and that I didn’t need to prove how tough I was to anyone, since I was challenging myself in class harder than anyone outside of class ever could.

Things started to change by 1988. Wayman had to move. He got a job as a school teacher in Topeka. The Karate Institute stayed open with help from others. Without Wayman and his infectious smile there it wasn’t quite the same, and it soon closed.

My Mom (who definitely has an indomitable spirit) Got on the phone and Called Master Joe Felky. He ran a smaller school on the east side of town. It is a Kim’s Academy school. Mom got me in; they were even kind enough to honor my rank. Master Felky had smaller size classes and more adult students than

I had been used to. His classes were tough. He had me learn the Taeguek form set up to Kuemgang. I enjoyed Master Felky's classes. He pushed me to be better and I achieved way more than I thought I ever could with his instruction.

It's 1990; As far as Tae Kwon Do goes I had everything going for me. I had done very well in tournaments across the state. I placed in Regionals and State. I did well at the World Tae Kwon Do Nationals in Oklahoma City. My picture had been in the paper more than a few times. I was at my peak. So what did I do? I quit. I came up with reasons. I wanted to do football, wrestle. I wanted to get a job. There's just too much going on for now. "I'll come back."

Truthfully, I just quit. Once I did that, I started to hang out with quitters. I became a quitter. By eighteen I had quit on most things. I almost didn't even graduate high school. Luckily I had a girlfriend who kept me in line and influenced me to finish. I was smart enough at least to marry her.

Years went by. I didn't go back. I practiced once and a while on my own to see if I could still do the physical things but my spirit had descended into a dark place. I hung out with the wrong crowd. I did things I'm ashamed of. I wasted valuable time on the wrong things. I had little self-control, I was easily discouraged, and I had lost my integrity. I see Integrity as staying true to oneself and doing the right thing even when there is no reward or recognition. How could I stay true to myself when I turned my back on my own-self and didn't know who I truly was anymore?

The call came one morning. It was my mom. She said, "Jason, Wayman, Your Tae Kwon Do instructor and friend has passed away." How could that happen? Wayman was indestructible. My mom told me Wayman had diabetes and it took him. I sat at Wayman's funeral and thought about all the things he had taught me. Not just kicking and punching but how to be a decent, honorable person by following the tenants of Tae Kwon Do. This was a wakeup call.

I looked at myself. I really looked at myself. I weighed well over three hundred pounds I was sick all the time and I had no real direction. I got so sick that I saw a doctor and he told me If I continued my bad habits that I would need to get life insurance to help my family when I'm gone. That was another wakeup call. I had a son on the way. I never expected the level of joy that having children would bring. I decided that I was not going to miss out on them and they were not going to miss out on having their dad.

I committed to a strict diet and exercise program that I came up with myself. I called it No More Bad Habits. I lost over one hundred twenty pounds in ten and a half months. I lost weight way too fast, (by the way. I would not recommend doing it the way I did.)

Late November 2010 I was looking for something to keep me active during the winter months. I saw an advertisement online for Sun Yi's Academy of Traditional Tae Kwon Do. I spoke with my wife about it briefly. I told her it's something I could do while it's cold outside then I'll get back to my regular summer activities. I called the number. I spoke to Master Arlen Redden. I kind of expected to speak with someone that's cocky and overly sure of himself but I think that I was the one that ended up coming off

that way. Arlen said, "Hey My sister Elina is going to start class soon, why don't you give it a try and see how you like it."

I walked in just in time for Tuesday's class. That moment, inside my soul I became that same six year old boy again. While working out in class, that first night, I just couldn't contain my smile. It was Just like Wayman was there with me smiling at me with his infectious smile, causing me to smile too. You might see me, especially when I'm winded and worn out, that same smile will be on my face. (You know who I'm thinking of.)

What was supposed to be something to just keep me active through the winter months has become much more. A new more intense desire to train and push myself had grown inside me. I wanted to go through each belt level and do the journey all over again. Learning the traditional Chon Ji forms and the defensive steps has been incredible. Each technique is so exciting to learn. It gives me something to work for and push myself again beyond the point to where I thought I could go. As I was going through this journey once again, I noticed that I was much more fulfilled when I helped others with their training more than when I would just train for myself. I experienced a new joy once I saw other students (that I had helped) learn a new move or technique. One day I stopped in the hallway at the Salina school. I looked closely at the Tenets of Tae Kwon Do that are posted on the wall. I read them. Then I read them again. I was already familiar with them, but I had not been living them to the best of my ability. I realized that I had been selfish. In part, I sometimes had been training for the wrong reasons. I came to realize that, Tae Kwon Do is a way of life. It's a way to live. It is having the courtesy to give to others your time and best efforts. It is having the integrity to stay true to oneself and knowing who you are what you're all about; knowing what the right thing to do is and acting on it, even when it is not the popular thing. It is persevering through the toughest of times by focusing on the task and not compromising on principles. It is controlling oneself by not acting out of impulse and emotion which is so hard to do when aggravated by what the world puts on us all. When this world seems stacked against you and you are full of fear there seems to be nowhere to go. You don't give into it. Don't let it dominate you. Have an indomitable spirit and don't give in to fear. Keep on going and don't quit

I would like to thank my instructors, Master Arlen Redden, Master Mark Sibilla, and Instructor Holly Peppersack who have become such great friends. Thanks to all the instructors of Sun Yi's Academy for all their guidance and the help that they have given me. I would also like to thank my childhood, Great Bend instructors Wayman Johnson, Master Price, Master Joe Felky, Master Joon Yong Kim, and I would especially thank Master Sun Yi. Thanks goes out to Korean people who had lost all but who they were by the end of WWII. They persevered and gave the world Tae Kwon Do. Thanks goes out to Master Jhoon Rhee for bringing Tae Kwon Do to the United States. . I cannot forget to thank my mother who allowed me to start Tae Kwon Do. She made me train in the front room of the house for hours night after night. She would make me do my form over and over again until I got it right. There is so much to give her credit for. Because of her, I still remember some of those Palgwe forms. Thank you Amy, my wife, and kids for all the patience and support you have given me. Your encouragement drives me to be the best I can be at all things.

Jason Langen