

# How did Taekwon-Do influence your life?

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## Introduction

Taekwon-Do had played a major role in my life since I was fourteen years old. Now, ten years later, in a different country, it continues to influence and mould me to become more of what I can be. The first six years in New Zealand was a continual roller coaster ride. Having to adjust to totally different way of life and speaking, I found out that when someone asks you "How are you?", you are really not meant to answer it truthfully (my car has broken down....) and when the South Islanders say "box of fluffy duckies" they are actually saying they are having a fantastic day or "peen" means pen, not pin and beer and bear, though pronounced exactly the same way means two totally different things.

By nature, I have always been timid, shy and sickly. Getting my first Dan was very significant to me, though not the belt itself but what it represents. The journey towards achieving 1st Dan taught me that if I want something bad enough, I could get it. Taekwon-Do gave me the first taste of achieving my dream. When I was a teenager, my dream was to go up to the stage during a school assembly in front of all my schoolmates to receive a prize. I badly wanted to be recognized and respected. Because of my small stature, I was constantly picked on and it continued for ten years till I was seventeen. I remembered having to go to Taekwon-Do training six out of seven days. I was close to giving up because I wanted to do the things that teenagers do – having fun. The two things that kept me going were my instructor's absolute belief in me and my dream. The day came when I had to go up the stage to accept the trophies during a regional tournament. I remembered hearing the applause that seemed to go in forever and people patting my back and congratulating me. For the first time in my life, I felt like a hero. Napoleon Hill once said, "a hero is someone who held on a little longer after others had let go".

## Interview

I wanted to find out if Taekwon-do has influenced others as it had me. I set out to interview five people, all with varied backgrounds. What I have discovered was rather astonishing. Their answers were different yet uncannily similar. General Choi Hong Hi had defined Taekwon-Do as "a way of life". According to him, "though it is a martial art, its discipline, technique and mental training are the mortar for building a strong sense of justice, fortitude, humility and resolve". He certainly had achieved that and much more, as I have discovered from talking to these people.

### **Rachael, 31 years old (4th degree black belt)**

Rachel had joined Taekwon-Do when she was twelve years old. She had always been shy. One of her biggest fears was public speaking. However, ten to fifteen years of instructing certainly cured her of that. In addition to this, having to meet people from all walks of life during seminars and tournaments helped her to relate to people better. Currently, she has a business running self-defense courses in New Zealand. Like many others I had interviewed, she confided to me

that Taekwon-Do had taught her perseverance. It was hard starting a business. Initially, her business was based in Sydney before moving back to Auckland. She had learned to set a goal, commit to it and believe in her abilities to achieve it. This obviously came from years of training for regional, national as well as international tournaments, which would have required an enormous amount of discipline, focus and perseverance.

However, this did not come easily without sacrifice. According to Rachel, the biggest compromise was having to sacrifice her social life (what social life?! even when she was a teenager though admittedly, she did not regret her actions, stating that those years had taught her a great deal. What kept her going was her hunger for knowledge and the continuous need for improvement, whether it is perfecting a kick or learning a new pattern.

### **Sonya, 28 years old (black stripe)**

Sonya, a lovely lady with a sweet demeanor and a heart of gold cheerfully agreed to my request to interview her. It is hard for anyone to imagine that she is indeed twenty- eight. She looked no more than nineteen and weighs only a little over forty kilograms. Furthermore, she is certainly does not fit the stereotyped woman martial artist.

In the beginning, Sonya had found it incredibly hard to get in front of the class. It had taken her a long time and many seminars later before she felt comfortable instructing a class full of students. Ironically, she was left in charge of the whole club in Greymouth when her formal instructor moved to Auckland. The first time she had to go to a seminar, she lost three kilos. One of her friends had laughed at her and told her that she would not be able to go through it. She had struggled to keep her food down on the day of the seminar. She would have pulled out had it not been another friend who had believed in her and finally convinced her to go. She was thoroughly surprised to find all the students and instructors tremendously helpful, supportive and understanding. She had gotten through the day better than she had thought she would.

Taekwon-do according to her, had given her the courage to stand up for herself. She related a story that had happened not too long ago. A skinhead had entered the shoe store she was managing. He wanted to exchange the pair of shoes he had bought earlier but he refused to pay for the difference. When she refused him, he threatened to beat her up. Normally, she would have run off and hid but this time, she stood her ground and told him pointedly that she "does not take this kind of crap". He looked startled for a minute, backed down and left. This experience was obviously very significant to her because for the first time, she had stood her ground and no longer allowed anyone to push her around. She had always been rather shy and timid but now, she recognizes her self worth and realizes that she has strengths and some really positive attributes. The important lesson here is "feel the fear and do it anyway" which she applies to her free sparring as well. She hates it and is sometimes scared of pin but does it anyway as this is the only way to get over any fears – face it straight on.

She identifies with people who lack confidence. She knows where they are coming from and feels that she can now help her students to gain confidence through Taekwon-Do. She told me excitedly that she has so much fun in Taekwon-Do. She had traveled to so many places and met

so many people she ordinarily would not have had it not been for Taekwon-Do This had broaden her horizons. She is willing to try new things and intends to live her life to the fullest.

Trying to be a little cynical here, I told her that surely she must have something negative during all these years in Taekwon-Do, she replied cheekily with a grin, "None whatsoever but I can certainly do with a few instructors here".

### **Carolyn, 21 years old (1st degree black belt)**

Carolyn currently resides in Perth, Australia. She had received her black belt when she was only fourteen years old. She discontinued her training when she left Malaysia to further her studies abroad.

According to Carolyn, the four main things she got out of Taekwon-Do were patience, leadership skills, confidence and of course not forgetting, a higher threshold for pain. As a result of the instructing she had to do, she had learned to set a good example as well as be a better role model. Most importantly, she feels confident walking down the street, knowing that she can defend herself in a threatening situation. She feels that all women should learn some form of martial arts or self-defense in this day and age. She admits too, like others that Taekwon-do had showed her the need to set a goal and persevere in order to achieve anything. Initially, she did not think that she would get her black belt but she kept going to training and gave it her all. I have known her for more than ten years and am constantly amazed at the dreams she has. She is a young lady who is driven and works to achieve her goals with such tenacity that one often forgets that she is only twenty-one.

### **Grant, 26 years old (2nd degree black belt)**

Grant is an instructor at the club he started up in Mosgiel. He is very popular among students and fellow instructors alike. It is no wonder, considering that he has a terrific sense of humor and is known to greet anyone who walks through the door with a "chipelada retada" (whatever that means!). Grant was inspired to join Taekwon-Do when he was thirteen and fourteen (he's not too sure). He wanted to become some "martial art dude".

Since becoming involved in Taekwon-Do, he had become more confident. Like many others I have talked to, he was really shy and scared to death to talk to other people. In fact, he did not have a high opinion of himself and more often than not, felt that he was a nuisance to others. Being involved in Taekwon-Do made him feel like he is somebody because for the first time, he felt accepted and respected.

Further along the interview, he tried to convince me that Taekwon-do is like a drug, highly addictive and he always gets "high" when he is training. (Hmmm...interesting). He feels like he is in heaven and thoroughly enjoys himself. (I'm finding it harder to make affirmative remarks as professional interviewers do).

### **Pam, 37 years old (black stripe)**

Before joining Taekwon-Do, she admitted that she was a couch potato and having to go for training, gave her the excuse to break the old habit. Although, she had always come across as confident, she had never felt that she was. Now, she feels better about herself and healthier. She will go walking by herself and knows that she can handle herself if attacked. She felt that free sparring and self-defense have probably helped increase her self-esteem. Though she dislikes free sparring but she knows that she has to put her fear aside and just do it. It has made her stronger, knowing that she can push beyond her limits. She knows that she is not particularly talented like many others, flexible or young, she is driven to get her black belt. Many had told her that she could not it. She has received numerous criticisms but this only makes her more determined.

Her daughter, Kirsty is also training with her. It made her day when her daughter decided to do a school project on her mom and Taekwon-Do. Kirsty told her classmates about her mother winning a medal in a national tournament and had Pam demonstrated some breaking techniques and patterns.

## Conclusion

From talking to Rachael, Sonya, Carol, Grant and Pam, I have learned that Taekwon-Do has provided a means for these people, myself included growing and learning to believe more in ourselves and what we can achieve. Taekwon-Do has given us the environment to learn how to set a goal, to persevere with the support of both students and instructors.