

Grandmaster Kimi Tang Soo Do, Keeping Martial Arts as an Art

History

Where were you born and when did you start to train?



I was born in Song Tan, South Korea and I began martial arts when I was nine. I trained with instructor Eyi I. Su in a suburb of Seoul, South Korea (called Young San) where my grandmother lived. We didn't have labels like "Tae Kwon Do"

or "Tang Soo Do" then. Gyms were called "Tiger Gym", "Dragon Gym" or "Mountain Gym". My gym, Tiger Gym, was Kong Soo Do, which is the same as Tang Soo Do.

What was your initial training in Korea like?

When I was young, the martial arts school was my second home. What I mean is, you slept there, you cleaned up, you met friends, and you sweat and got a lot of bruises. We trained every single day. Sometimes for five or six hours per day. Training became a part of each day. If you did miss a day it felt like you skipped brushing your teeth.

What made up a typical day of class for you?

Training in Korea, more than 50 years ago, was very different than today. We might practice one technique for several

hours just so our instructors could see if we were humble and patient enough to be a worthy student. There are and were other ways to achieve this goal too. For example, we might be asked to spend the afternoon cleaning the dojang. But, I think the days of practicing one kick 1,000 times or a single punch for two hours are over. Today's student doesn't have the time to spend 4 hours a day, 6 days a week perfecting each skill, so we try to instill patience, character, technique and discipline in other ways.

Testing was an event. Testing took place on Saturdays and lasted 2 to 3 hours, only 10% of which was kicking, forms and self-defense.

The other 90% of a test day was free sparring. Padding and sparring gear was too expensive so we didn't use any. We made Full Contact to the legs, chest, ribs and head, but only lightly touched the face.

Did you continue martial arts through high school?

Oh, yes. On the high school karate team in 1968, I went to the first Asian



Championships in Hong Kong. At sixteen, I became the bantamweight champion. At that time, I considered the martial arts just “a



special hobby;” I never thought about becoming a karate teacher, because at that time martial arts instructors never earned

enough money to make a living.

What did you do after high school?

After finishing high school, I attended Kuk Min University of Law for two years, and then I went into the military, holding a place on the White Horse Rock Army martial arts team for three years. Still, the martial arts were just a pastime, and I finished my military service and then came home to Song Tan, where I trained.

Arrival in the United States

When did you move to the United States?

I came to the United States on July 16, 1976, directly to York, Pennsylvania. Why York? Because York is the first capital of the United States. It started here. I was very familiar with American society. My parents had a night club for American GI's in the 1950's in Osan City, Korea.

Were there any challenges with bringing a traditional Korean martial art to American culture?

35 years ago students came to class every day for a few hours each day. Today's students

are mothers fathers sons and daughters. Their lives are filled with activities that put demands on everyone's time. But the desire to learn martial arts, disciplined, self-defense and more hasn't changed.

Today's student may only be in a one hour class II or three times a week, but they are expected to practice another three hours per week on the road. These students seek to prioritize things in their life such as education, family, love and religion. They seek a balance between these activities but they forget, without health, they can participate in none of these things. Health must be their top priority in order to be useful to the family, loved-ones, church, synagogue or temple.

Did you open a school right away?

I took a day job at Caterpillar Tractor Company as

a machine operator. I worked 3:30 PM to 11:30 PM. I also taught martial arts from 11 AM to 1 PM. I taught those classes at a downtown-York location. I knew that the time would come when I would stop working nights (and teaching day and weekend classes) and begin to teach full-time.

In order to save money and open my own school, I drove a motorcycle all year. I even remember riding it in the winter. My wife used to tell me, “Your knee is frozen,” and “You are crazy.”

Between 1977 and 1989 I moved my school five times. I was looking for



the right place to provide students with enough space to train, a convenient location and high visibility.

When did you start teaching full-time?

When the Caterpillar job slowed down, I began teaching full-time day and night. In 1979 I bought a 5,000 square-foot building in downtown York. When parking problems became a real headache for me and my students, I moved to a shopping-center that was next to the biggest toy store in town. From 1980 to 1985, we averaged 150 enrolled children.

Did you continue to train during this time?

Well, a martial artist never stops training. You train every day. You train when you work on your forms. You train when you practice kicking. You train when you teach a new student to break

down each form into small and simple combat/fighting scenarios. Every time you put on your dobok, you deepen your skills and understanding in the martial arts.

I also continued to travel to learn more about martial arts, global martial culture and to further my own knowledge. From York, PA to Munich, Germany to Hong Kong, China – the martial arts are alive and we can all learn from one another.

In the summer of 1985, I had the chance to visit Beijing Sports University in China. I saw so many people practicing martial arts in the streets, alleys and in front of houses; young and old regardless of age or sex. That tells

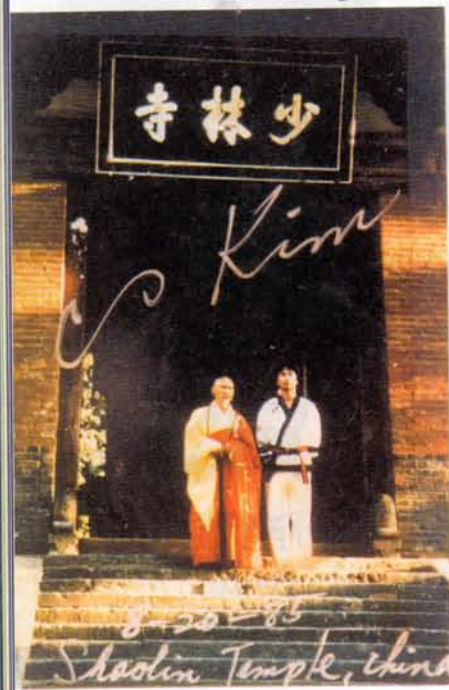
us martial arts are for everyone. Everyone can enjoy and have great benefits from the martial arts. I had the chance to work with great Kung Fu masters and movie stars.

I decided to also visit a native place of martial arts, the Shaolin Temple. You are able to feel the many generations of monks who practiced the martial arts there. I was very pleased with what I experienced. It was a very worthwhile trip. I will visit again someday.

I encourage my students to travel to Korea, Japan and China, with the expectation that they train, learn, exchange, experience and grow. Not a typical vacation and sightseeing experience, but to put on your uniform to sweat, learn and grow.

When did you move the school to its current location?

In 1988, when my lease ran out, I built my own dojang in York. And, because I was married and had three children I bought enough land to build my house behind the karate school.



Tell us about your family and your school's current location.



I am a little different from other Korean martial art instructors. First, my wife is American. Second, I built my home on the same property as the Pan Am Tang Soo Do Federation Headquarters. I did this so that I could be available for teaching and supervising new teachers (at any time), but also I would be able to be involved in many more family activities.

Seeing my kids when they came home from school was another added benefit. I have three children and they all started training with me when they were four years old. Eventually, Matthew, Anthony and Deena became Sah Bum Nim Dul (Masters of Tang Soo Do). Matthew and Anthony continued in my footsteps and each teaches full-time.

Do you have many children in your school?

Quite a lot! In fact we split them up into "grasshopper" (5-7 year olds) and "children's" classes (8 and up) to better focus on their abilities and skills. They are all very special. A world without children is just like a car without brakes. Children are our hope. Children are our teachers. Children cry when their feelings are hurt. Children smile when they are happy. Adults don't. You must become a child too. When you teach children, have fun with youngsters, then they listen and learn from you. They feel very close to you. Martial arts instructors can give children a great gift, the

gift of confidence. This is the most important thing in life that we can have. When children have confidence, their lives are happy and successful.

Why do women train in the martial arts?

Many women train in our school. And, just like the men who train here, they train for many different reasons. Some women train to learn self-defense, while others train to become physically fit or because there are in love with the art. So whether you are male or female, there's no shortcut to personal development and real growth. You set a simple goal, you work for it and you reach it. Then, you set another one. You work hard to reach each goal. When other people see your accomplishments, they will gain respect for you. Then, you can tell your children to do the same thing—teach them what can be done, the Tang Soo Do way.



Online Schools and Universities are popping up everywhere. What do you think of them?

There are advertisements every day in magazines, newspapers, the internet, Facebook, etc. offering quick results and shortcuts. My strong advice to people that would be tempted by these advertisements is to save their money and make time to actually achieve something truly meaningful with their life. Remember,

studying martial arts is not a “social club” (a gym can be that). Martial arts is an opportunity to better yourself.

What advice do you have for an aspiring student?

If they want to be a martial artist they first must be prepared. Prepare to locate a good school. Do your homework—what style of martial arts is being taught? What are the instructor’s credentials? Who is the instructor’s headmaster?

Grandmaster? What curriculum does he or she follow? Is there a national or international foundation or federation that certifies rank? Can your rank be transferred to another school? How long have they been in business? Can you watch a class? Are there students in your age group? Can you ask them about what they like and don’t like about class?

Students seeking a good school should know the instructor’s philosophy, credentials, background and personal information.

Is the instructor part of the Federation or Association? Can anyone join those organizations by paying money? Or, can they only join after training, documenting their art, testing, growing and improving?

Do they still have an instructor of their own? Who is their instructor? Can you contact their instructor for a reference?

Turning back to the instructors personal information, ask if the instructor’s family is involved in the school? Why or why not? Do they advise law-enforcement professionals? Do they embrace a life of learning, giving and teaching?

Do they still train, practice and test? If they show a sincere focus you can be assured that they’ll be good instructors.

Once a student has done his or her homework, they are ready to train. They should have the support of their parents or spouse to begin martial arts training. This is not like going to the gym three days a week for 30 minutes. You should be prepared to learn something, build upon it the next week; and build upon that in a month; and build upon that in a year. In a lot of ways, learning martial arts is like learning a new language—there will be a lot of vocabulary and a lot of little pieces to put together—and years from now you’ll be fluent and will be able to have conversations in that language. That’s how martial arts training builds. Kicks, punches, blocks, forms, sparring, breaking, self-defense and meditation. They are all pieces of your training. You put them together in forms and sparring, and then you display your skill during testing. As you progress you will renew your commitment to be the best person you can be as well as the best student you can be.

Why didn't Tang Soo Do merge with Tae Kwon Do?

Both Tang Soo Do and Tae Kwon Do have long and interesting histories. The art you now call Tae Kwon Do took on a new face in the 1960’s. On March 20, 1971, then Korean President Park named Tae Kwon Do a national sport. Tang Soo Do has remained as a martial art continuously since the Silla Dynasty. Tae Kwon Do, Moo Duk Kwon and Tang Soo Do are almost the same martial art. Tae Kwon Do has become an international sport while Tang Soo Do has not. We are keeping with our traditional martial arts way.

Tang Soo Do has been in the United States about 40+ years. I hope we’ll still be able to keep with our own traditional

martial art as it was yesterday, as it is today, and long into the future.

Tell us about your organization.

Our Federation, called the Pan Am Tang Soo Do Federation is growing rapidly. But, I don't want it to grow too fast. I want our Federation to be a candle instead of a match. With one qualified member at a time, we can have a solid foundation. Without a strong foundation, anything you do in life will be gone someday. My day starts with the idea that I am working with each Federation member to promote Tang Soo Do. This is what I am and who I am.

Our Federation goals are togetherness. If we work together with Tang Soo spirit, we can give children confidence and we can live our lives with calm and peace of mind. I always tell each instructor that these are beautiful things. I tell them to work harder and promote Tang Soo Do together—you and me—with respect for the centuries ahead.

What is the Federation's philosophy?

My philosophy and my federation's philosophy is that we're bonded together through an open mind, with a problem-solving, martial arts philosophy. We stress education and technical excellence for personal character improvement. That's why we have approximately 20,000 members today.

How has the Federation helped your students?

My goal for my organization is that I want the Tang Soo Do practitioner or Tae Kwon Do practitioner to know that we must have

roots—to respect where we came from. Originally, there was no “Tae Kwon Do” in Korea. We all studied Tang Soo Do, but the government forced the martial arts to all be called Tae Kwon Do. However, some of us kept the original name. We found the roots, and changed from Tae Kwon Do to Tang Soo Do. A lot of people know that foundation, but some people practice martial arts as a sport, and others do martial arts as an art. We do martial arts as an art.

When I see a student embrace this philosophy and show their willingness—their sincere sacrifice of their time and efforts to promote tang soo do, I see this as an excellent opportunity. Each time an opportunity like this has come along, I have opened a school for them. As a result, I am now running four schools in York County and a total of thirteen in Pennsylvania.

What would you like your legacy to be?

Legacy is a complicated word. It really means what have you left behind and what are you grateful for. I am grateful for the love of family and friends. My wife and children are a constant joy to me. As for each school, each master, each black belt, they are all precious and I am better for having known them. I would like to think that my teaching, my influence and the influence of all of the Federation's masters will continue to touch people's lives for many years to come. **TKD**

