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NEWSMAKERS

Kim Pyung Soo gets his kicks by teaching karate

The experience of Kim Pyung Soo proves once again that if you can't be a hero in your own hometown, find a new hometown.

Kim, a professional martial arts teacher in Korea in the 1960s, longed for an international reputation. He became convinced, however, that he'd never get the exposure he needed if he remained in Korea, in part because there were too many restrictions on his freedom at the time.

He arrived in Houston in January 1968 with \$100, the maximum amount of money he could take out of Korea.

Today he runs two martial arts schools in Houston, has been on the faculty of Rice University and the University of Houston and was official coordinator for Tae Kwon Do for the 1986 U.S. Olympic Festival in Houston.

Former students, meanwhile, have taken Kim's teaching methods and founded schools in a dozen or so cities in Texas as well as a half-dozen other states and Mexico.

Kim teaches Cha Yon Ryu, meaning "The Natural Way." Cha Yon Ryu incorporates Korean, Japanese and Chinese martial arts plus a few ideas of his own. He is a ninth-degree black belt, or Summa Cum Layoff, class of '86.

The highest black belt is 10, but Kim's not anxious for the honor; it's frequently granted as an honorary title to those who have gone to that great karate ring in the sky. In his mid-to-late 40s, Kim isn't even close to retirement, yet.

He received a degree in languages from the University of Seoul, so he had no problem speaking English when he arrived. He did have a problem with money, though, because his particular visa didn't permit him to earn money.

His reputation was enough to get him invited to matches across the country, though, which paid his travel and living expenses. And when he was in Houston,



Soo: Not anxious for tenth degree

he appeared at demonstrations at most of the local universities. Talks and demonstrations for television audiences were particularly helpful.

After six months of living on paid expenses, he went to the immigration department to apply for a "green card," which would allow him to earn money. He wanted to earn money, of course, by opening his own school, and through friends he found just what he needed: rent-free facilities.

The owner of an unused building downtown let Kim open shop in exchange for maintaining the premises, not to mention a personal presence as a means of keeping scavengers from tearing down the building piece by piece.

Kim still has the downtown school. His second school is in Spring Branch, and his average enrollment totals about 100 students.

Kim also has lots of competition. He chose Houston because, compared to New York and California, martial arts training was new here 20 years ago.

"There was almost no one in the southern United States," says Kim, but now the industry has come full circle. Houstonians assume that an Oriental who opens a martial arts school is a master. And that, he says, is not always the case.

By Raymond Klempin