



Rice Chayon-Ryu PE Class Members

"Many martial arts schools emphasize the fighting aspect of karate over its original purpose, which was designed in part to enhance spiritual growth."

The Natural Way

by David D. Medina / Rice University

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After forty-four years of practicing and teaching karate Grandmaster Kim Soo is not about to hang up his martial arts uniform. He still leads fifteen classes a week in vigorous self-defense exercises that promote mental and physical benefits.

His perseverance recently earned him a tenth-degree black belt - the highest rank in karate. The promotion is so difficult to achieve that it is often awarded posthumously as a ceremonial honor to those who have contributed substantially to the martial arts. But because Kim has trained consistently for nearly half a century he managed to receive this distinction at the age of fifty-five "For me, martial arts is a way of life, a form of religion " says Kim, who founded the Rice Karate Club in 1968. He has also taught an introductory karate course in the fall since 1981 in the Department of Human Performance and Health Sciences. "The martial arts teach the values of humility, patience, respect, and sincerity."

In Kim's early years, though, karate served a more practical purpose. As a youngster growing up in Seoul, South Korea, Kim says he was a weak "pretty boy" who suffered constant beatings by rougher kids. The abuse took a toll on his confidence to the point that his grades dropped. He began studying karate in the seventh grade and two years later received his black belt. "When I got my black belt, the whole world was smiling at me, he says. "So I decided that someday I would be a martial arts instructor so that I could help people like me who felt miserable."

After graduating from high school, Kim was recruited to teach karate to the bodyguards of the South Korean president, Syngman Rhee, and to instruct hand-to-hand combat in the South Korean army. In college, Kim started his first karate club at Han Kuk University of Foreign Studies, where he earned a BA degree in Russian language and literature. He eventually became a polyglot, speaking Korean, English, Spanish, and Russian. "I studied these languages because I wanted to go anywhere in the world and be a teacher," he says. But before he went anywhere, Kim opened a karate academy in Seoul, taught members of the United States Armed Forces, and served as a correspondent for Black Belt a major martial arts magazine.

His dream of coming to America finally came true in 1968. With one hundred dollars in his pocket, Kim arrived in Houston and moved into an old downtown building at the corner of Clay and Jackson Streets. He lived alone upstairs with only the bare necessities and held classes downstairs his wife and young child joined him a year later.

Since his arrival, Kim has taught at Rice, the University of Houston, the University of St. Thomas, and Texas Southern University. He operates three schools in Houston and oversees twenty-six branch schools in

Texas, twenty-four throughout the country and one each in Germany, Japan, Korea, Mexico, Saudi Arabia, and Russia.

Many martial arts schools, explains Kim, emphasize the fighting aspect of karate over its original purpose, which was designed in part to enhance spiritual growth. "The traditional forms teach discipline, wisdom, and philosophical insight, traits that are not acceptable to a system that is trying to create champion fighters." According to Kim, karate, or tae kwon do as it is known in Korea, was practiced as early as 37 BC. A minority of the practitioners studied the martial arts as a spiritual exercise, but most studied it to protect the king or emperor. Today tae kwon do is a worldwide sport and part of the Olympics.

Early in his training, Kim suffered rheumatism, ulcers, and lower back pain, because he concentrated too much on the fighting aspect of karate. So he developed ChaYon Ryu or the "Natural Way," a system that would provide health benefits as well as teach self-defense. Kim believes that martial arts movements should be natural to the structure of the human body. Chayon-Ryu is founded on basic principles of proper breathing, proper footing, and proper body balance and is also based on natural movements culled from six martial arts styles that Kim has mastered and continues to improve. He frequently travels to Korea and other countries to study under legendary teachers.

"Unlike other grandmasters that have traded in their karate uniform for a business suit and taken a symbolic position within their system I still practice karate and instruct classes," he says. " Maybe in another twenty years, I can get my eleventh-degree black belt."