

# Beyond the Dojang: How Taekwon-Do is shaping who I am

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*An Essay by Garrett Kendall*

I remember the first time I stepped into the Taranaki Taekwon-Do (TKD) Dojang wearing my new dobok - barefoot, nervous, and holding my white belt in my hands. I thought I was there to learn how to defend myself. But I was about to learn something much more important.

Most people see Taekwon-Do - and martial arts in general - full of cool kicks, brutal breaking, and of course free sparring. I started my journey when I was 7. I too imagined moving, punching, kicking, rolling, and blocking similar to how ninjas do in films. Seven years later, I see Taekwon-Do as something much deeper. The Dojang is more than a training space. It is a place of support, where hard work is respected, and where physical and personal growth is celebrated. The instructors and fellow students have shaped me just as much as the techniques and patterns. The life lessons taught within the Dojang have carried out into my life. The training shaping me not just in TKD, but also at school, work, home, and the way I hold myself.

At home, the rule was simple: if I wanted to try something, I had to give it a proper shot—not just dabble and quit. When I first started Taekwon-Do, I wasn't sure it was for me, but my parents committed to taking me to the Dojang so I could truly see if it would click. A few months in, I witnessed something unforgettable: Mr. Page's IV Dan grading. Watching him perform patterns with precision and passion. Moving on to free sparring multiple opponents. I watched him being so exhausted he could barely answer questions from the examiners, but then, moving on to break multiple tiles over and over again like they were paper. It sealed the deal—I was hooked. It became my inspiration and from there I took Taekwon-Do much more seriously. Witnessing his achievement lit a fire in me—I wanted to do what he did. At my gradings, I wanted to inspire others just as he inspired me, motivating the next generation of black belts to chase their goals with the same drive.

When I began, I focused on rushing through each ribbon in kids' class trying to attain the next grade. I believed that memorising patterns and passing tests was my way to that goal, but now I understand that it's not about speed or repetition, if that was the case, nearly anyone could race to becoming black belt. As the old saying goes, it's not the

destination but the journey that matters. The belts are milestones - not the finish line. I learned true progress comes from growth, discipline, and maintaining an indomitable spirit no matter the adversity.

From the start of my Taekwon-Do journey we were taught respect and discipline. To stand still in ranks, hands together behind our backs, eyes forward, engaged with the instructors, quietly waiting, ready for the next cue or command. I remember during kids class we would stand in our rows for 2-3 minutes and if anyone moved another minute would be added. It's become second nature. I catch myself standing the same way—at school, on stage, at work, everywhere. When receiving awards or sometimes even when entering a room, I instinctively bow, just as we do in the Dojang. Those simple lessons taught me to be focused and present. This is something I do not believe I would have fully understood without that guidance from my TKD instructors.

Respect, both given and received in the Dojang, has woven itself into my life. Whether I am greeting others, engaging in my community, serving, or representing my school. I have learned to listen, speak with respect, and contribute with confidence (even though I can come off as shy). That same confidence has led me to public speaking through performance and speech. I now represent my school by being a part of the debating team and Shakespeare group, opportunities that I would never have seen myself doing without Taekwon-Do in my life.

At the beginning of class we form up, face the general, recite the student oath, bow to our instructors and senior members. This only adds those bricks to the foundation of respect. The student oath and the tenets of Taekwon-Do are some of the simplest yet effective ways of expressing the morals and ethics of life.

***Courtesy*** - to show politeness in one's attitude and behaviour towards others

***Integrity*** - being honest and having strong moral principles

***Perseverance*** - continuing action despite difficulty or delay

***Self Control*** - restraining one's impulses and actions

***Indomitable Spirit*** - never give up no matter the adversity

These 5 virtues I aspire to follow throughout everything I do and everyone I work with.

Throughout my school and TKD journey I have been called upon to assist fellow students. Recently I have been trusted in the Dojang to guide others in class. This service is teaching me to be patient, clear, and encouraging. This has once again been reflected at school as I am now an official lunchtime math tutor. Even though I am only a 15 year old, Year 11 student, I have ended up teaching 17 year olds algebra and calculus. It's deeply fulfilling to support others in their growth, especially when I'm on that journey too. I have discovered there is satisfaction in helping others succeed. Leadership is not about being the best - it is about lifting others up with you.

As a tutor, I've found that patience and clarity required to help someone understand a new concept - comes straight from my time helping juniors in class. Encouraging a student struggling with maths feels no different than coaching someone through a difficult technique. The sense of responsibility to guide and support others is a direct reflection of the leadership modelled by my instructors.

Taekwon-Do has also made me more aware of the kind of impact I have. I understand that being confident and respectful isn't just about personal development - it's a way of also modelling behaviour that may encourage others to new heights. Whether it's standing up for someone, resolving a conflict peacefully, or simply listening when someone needs to be heard, these small acts are just as powerful as any physical skill I've learned.

Taekwon-Do has taught me that true strength doesn't come from just bettering yourself, but how you can assist others to be better. The lessons I've learned don't just stay in the Dojang or stay as my personal achievements - they extend into how I can serve my community.

Discipline is a huge part of TKD, and I thought it was about mastering patterns and kicks. Over the years I have learned that it is staying focused in class, meeting deadlines and treating others with respect. This mindset made me earn many positive comments in my school reports, and the trust of my teachers. Something I'm sure my parents are very proud of.

Looking ahead, I want to continue carrying these Taekwon-Do values into whatever future I pursue. Whether it is engineering, programming, or a leader in another field, the mindset I've developed - ingrained in discipline, perseverance, and respect - will remain foundational. I plan to continue being involved in mentoring, volunteering, and creating spaces where others feel supported to grow.

One of the biggest lessons of Taekwon-Do is perseverance. I can count the amount of sessions I have missed throughout the years on two hands. That might sound extreme, but to me showing up is just part of the process. Over the years I have had ups and downs whether I was tired, stressed, or discouraged - but I still trained. The first time I had the opportunity to break a board, I failed. This was one of the most frustrating parts of when I first began. But my instructors encouraged me and I did not let this failure keep me down. I twisted it to motivate myself. I trained and trained and next time the opportunity came around when I had a chance for redemption I smashed it.

Consistency has been key to my success in life. It has helped me in exams and to push through low motivation. Progress does not always show instantly, but if you stick to it, it will come. Two quotes that are brought up quite regularly in class sums this up very well:

*“Train easy, grading hard. Train hard, grading easy.” ; and,*

*“Pain is the best teacher, but no one wants to take its class.”*

The physical side of training has pushed me to greater heights. Inspired by these fitness demands, I run every morning before school - not because I have to but because I want to. Turns out running is very addictive. Every run is an opportunity to go farther or faster. The same goes for weight training. Pushing for that extra rep or extra kilogram. Thanks to Taekwon-Do, I train with structure and goals - not just random efforts. It has made me more active, focused, and motivated in all aspects of life.

I strongly believe that most people who haven't trained in Taekwon-Do wouldn't expect it to involve more than physical techniques. I know I didn't at first. I was surprised it included a rich amount of theory—like Korean terminology, the history of Taekwon-Do, the lives of influential Korean figures, as well as personal reflection. Most people may think this is pointless when they're there to learn the physical stuff, but they would be very wrong. I have come to learn that knowledge about these individuals doesn't diminish the Taekwon-Do experience—it deepens it. Understanding the trials and hardships they faced strengthens our commitment, especially during patterns that

symbolise and honour them. Knowing who they were inspires me to represent them with the respect and integrity they deserve.

Closer to home, I'm deeply inspired by Master Dale Copeland. Her unwavering commitment, profound wisdom, and remarkable grasp of Taekwon-Do's history leave a lasting impression. To begin her journey in her 50s and rise to the rank of Master in her 80s is nothing short of extraordinary. I felt genuinely honoured and humbled to grade for my I Dan Black Belt on the same day she achieved her Masters—an experience I will always treasure. To know that it was Dale who originally inspired Mr Page, who in turn inspired me, tangibly illustrates the ripple effect of this art—how one person's influence can echo through generations.

Right now, I'm working towards my second dan, and my journey will not end there. I know there is still much to learn and discover. I've realised physical belts and ranks are not the most important part of this journey. Even though they are a nice bonus! What truly matters is how the principles of TKD continue to shape the person I am becoming - someone who values respect and discipline, perseverance and helping others.

Everything I have learned does not stop when I take off the uniform or take a step out of the Dojang. And due to that, I strive everyday to be a better version of myself - thus hopefully building a more peaceful world. Ultimately, the world doesn't just need fighters - it needs more people who live by the tenets of Taekwon-Do. And I plan to be one of them.

That nervous boy holding his white belt feels like a lifetime ago. Now, I proudly carry the black belt not just physically around my waist, but metaphorically in how I carry myself through life. Taekwon-Do is not just something I do now - it is a key aspect of who I am.

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