

## **Inspirational Martial Arts Stories 2006-2**

From: [www.your-martial-arts-resources.com](http://www.your-martial-arts-resources.com)

### **Full life too busy for regrets:**

From: <http://timesunion.com>

(April 14, 2006):

This wasn't supposed to happen. How could it be God's will for 15,000 volts to char Army Pfc. Paul Miosek, to burn his skull and fry his legs and sear identification tag imprints into his neck and chest as if they were tattoos, forever scarred?

The power surging through the overhead electrical cable was supposed to be shut off as Miosek's company loaded Bradley infantry fighting vehicles onto a train's flatbed cars in Bremerhaven, Germany, on Dec. 2, 1990, one month before the start of the Gulf War.

He was a 22-year-old on guard duty, inspecting the fighting vehicles' hatches, when he backed into that cable.

"My brain has chosen to block it out," Miosek says.

Six weeks later, he awoke from a coma. More than two years later, he was released from the last of five hospitals, an amputee who lost both legs and suffered brain injuries that impair his vision (it is still double in his right eye), motor movement, information processing and speech. He had to relearn how to do everything.

He became depressed and lived like "a hermit" for some time, a girl-crazy young guy who doubted he'd find a woman with whom to share life.

He didn't even know where to try. He didn't go to bars or dance clubs. A friend suggested he "go to college. That's where the girls are."

And that's where he met Tara, the pretty Hudson Valley Community College student who would become his wife.

"I never pictured this happening," she says. "But even from the beginning the (wheelchair) never bothered me. I think it helped (Paul) accept himself, too, because I accept him for him."

They have twin 4-year-old sons, and Tara is pregnant with another son due on June 20. But there's another love in Paul's life, a love he suppressed as a child because he wasn't allowed to pursue it: participatory sports.

Miosek says his strict stepmother wouldn't allow him to play organized football or try martial arts, as he would have liked as a child.

"She was just mean," Miosek says of his stepmother, now deceased. "She was miserable, and she wanted to make us miserable. She didn't know how to be happy, and she didn't like for my brother and I to be happy."

Now he plays everything.

Last week he attended the annual National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic in Snowmass, Colo., for the eighth time. He likes to try different sports, so there he might downhill bi-ski or play sled hockey, scuba dive or horseback ride, fly-fish or wheelchair fence. Whereas in the Summer Wheelchair Games he competes in archery and bowling, discus and shot put, javelin and air rifle. Three evenings a week he takes tae kwon do class (he's a blue belt), and he bowls with fellow veterans most weeks. Miosek, 37, doesn't mind his part-time job preparing salads and parfaits at a McDonald's. But it doesn't provide the satisfaction of athletic competition, through which he earns more medals than Colin Powell. When freed of his wheelchair as he scuba dives or downhill skis, paddling underwater or slaloming down slopes, "I feel," Miosek says, "like I can do anything. It makes you alive."

A guest in Miosek's Glenville home asks if he regrets enlisting in the Army, a decision that set in motion the events leading to his accident. Miosek turns toward his wife and says he doesn't because then they would never have met.

"I love the life I have," he says, "and I can't think of it any other way."

### **This karate kid excels without eyesight:**

From: <http://www.azstarnet.com/allheadlines/124906>  
(April 17, 2006):

On a late July night two years ago, 17-year-old Bryan Duarte was driving his new all-terrain vehicle up and down dusty desert paths near a Casa Grande housing development.

While driving across a drainage ditch, the quad's front tires slammed into a large culvert. Duarte went rocketing forward with extra force stemming from his passenger's weight. His head met the handlebars and then the culvert.

Aside from a swollen brain and split skull, Duarte was left without the ability to see, smell or taste. Also gone was his dream of becoming a Marine; he had enlisted just a week before.

"I didn't understand it," Duarte said. "It was temporary, I thought. I would ask, 'Are my eyes open?' I was really confused for about a month."

Today he is a competitive yellow belt in karate. Last month he took part in his first karate tournament, the Southwest Open Karate Championship, in Phoenix. Duarte did not tell the judges he was blind.

Mark Steuver, owner of the Institute of Self Defense in Casa Grande, encouraged Duarte to fool the judges into thinking he had sight.

Larry Saylor, a judge, said: "Mark had come up to me at the beginning of the day and told me about a student who wanted to participate in forms and sparring — 'I have a little problem. He is blind.'

"If you had not watched him walk onto the floor, you would not know he was blind," Saylor added.

During the competition, Duarte would wait for the first move from his opponent, then determine where the competitor was, his height and how to fight back.

"One thing about the tournament," Duarte explained, "was I had to rely on feeling and then figure out where they are."

"He has recognized he is not a sitting duck," Steuver added. After the accident, Duarte tried to go back to his normal life.

Rehabilitation took time for this once-active teenager. Duarte had to relearn how to do household chores, how to cook, care for himself and use a cane.

He graduated from seeing-eye school at the top of his class. Graduation included crossing all four corners on a busy highway by himself.

He had been on his own during high school, working and paying for an apartment.

To get his life back together, he signed up as a general-studies student at Central Arizona College, based in Coolidge. Then a friend of Duarte's told him about taking a karate class at the school. "I liked it a lot," Duarte said.

He wanted to learn everything about karate, Chinese kenpo and kung fu. Steuver became his mentor.

His first time in the class was discouraging. Duarte was told to move his feet a certain way, and he had a "foot to go" in a stance. "I didn't know how far it was," Duarte said.

But he adapted quickly to his surroundings. Duarte turned a fan on in the karate room so he would know where he was and where to go. Eventually, he figured out how to move about the classroom.

"I can touch a wall and know where I am," he said.

Steuver was impressed by Duarte's perseverance.

"I was surprised (by) what we achieved," Steuver said. "I never in my mind would have thought he could go this fast. He's only been training half a year."

Steuver also invited Duarte to attend his martial-arts school, a challenge he welcomed. He set a goal to win his first championship and to move up to an intermediate purple belt by January 2007.

Other students are now benefiting from Duarte's sixth sense. "A guy who started about the same time as me, I help him a lot," he said. "Why are you doing it that way?" Duarte would ask the fellow student.

"He can explain it to him," Steuver said. "Every time you move up in rank, you help those who follow in your footsteps."

Steuver doesn't go soft on his student. "He makes me take him down. I don't hold out on him, and I don't cut him any slack."

"I have gotten knocked off my feet and sent flying in the air," Duarte added. "There is no special treatment."

**Think this lady is an easy target? Think again:**

From: <http://www.modbee.com/local/story/12064449p-12819201c.html>

(April 17, 2006):

If you're unlucky enough to startle Elaine Kohler in a dark alley, beware the "rising knee."

When the great-grandmother is serious about demonstrating the move, she has only one request.

"Hold my glasses."

With a flurry of limbs, a swift punch to the stomach and, true to its name, a rising knee to the groin, Kohler throws second-degree black belt David King to the mat. A final chop in the back helps him get there faster.

At 71 years old, Kohler recently earned her black belt in shou shu, a Chinese martial art.

She is the oldest student to earn a black belt at Moore's Chinese Martial Arts, which has 25 schools nationwide. The schools teach the style known as "fighting ways of the beast," which integrates the motions of seven fighting animals into its program of self-defense.

Earning her black belt wasn't the first time Kohler has broken boundaries.

In the 1950s, Kohler joined the Air Force. She said she was part of the first class of women to graduate from crypto-grapher school, where she was taught to decode messages.

"As a woman, just being in the military was really hard," she said. "People look down on you and you have to prove yourself."

And she did. Kohler earned the position of crew chief and was given clearance to decode "top secret" messages.

Kohler began training toward a black belt nine years ago. She had started coming to Moore's in Turlock once a week while working full time and raising seven children, with two stepchildren in her care during the summers. She retired four years ago as a nurse at Stanislaus County Juvenile Hall in Modesto.

She said fellow students and instructors at Moore's have pushed her to keep going, though devastating events in her life nearly forced her to quit.

When her husband, George, had a stroke eight years ago, Kohler spent a year caring for him at home before he died.

"The stress was very hard, but my training would offer that escape," she said. "When you're doing this, you don't think of anything else."

As Kohler got within a level of earning her black belt, she began to train several times a week.

To graduate to black-belt status, she spent one hour demonstrating hundreds of hand weapons and fighting sequences in front of two dashifus, or grand masters. Kohler was required to show speed, coordination, power and focus. Some of the sequences, or katas, are based on fighting off 23 invisible attackers.

"Anyone that goes to attack her is expecting an easy target," said King, known as shun shifu, or head instructor, of the Turlock Moore's. "The surprise alone will send them running."

This weekend, Kohler is moving from Turlock, her home for four decades, to Lyman, Wash., population 500.

Because there is no Moore's in Lyman, Kohler has captured her moves on videotape and plans to outfit her two-car garage like the studio to work out with her 42-year-old son, Matt. He is three levels from earning his black belt.

"I can train him now," she said. "Then, I'll have to see what else there is for me to do."

### **Karate helps woman in wheelchair stay active:**

From: <http://www.kansascity.com>  
(April 19, 2006):

Olathe resident adds orange belt to her list of accomplishments

Sharyna Miley was nervous as she tested for her second belt in karate, orange.

She went through punches, blocks and jabs. Unlike the rest of her testing class, she did not kick.

Miley, a 57-year-old Olathe resident, uses a power wheelchair due to multiple sclerosis.

"She does (the moves) from a sitting position from the chair," said Matt McDaniel, her karate instructor. "We modify the seat position from the chair, modify the attacker from a standing position. Her wheelchair weighs 300 pounds, so we use that route for self-defense."

At the test, even without kicking, she outperformed the children in her testing class Saturday. She confidently executed her kata, a series of punches and blocks in the four cardinal directions. Since she used both hands to punch, she couldn't reach the controls of her power chair to turn around, so she did her moves to her front and both sides.

But everything else was nearly the same, if not harder, as what the children did.

“She’s more advanced,” said Kameron Blomquist, a third-grader at Comanche Elementary School in Overland Park. Miley tested for an adult level belt instead of a junior belt.

“It’s funny, we haven’t had to change too much of what we do at the school,” McDaniel said. “It really speaks to the strength of Sharyna.”

Miley enjoys the challenges of karate.

“I’m having a blast, I really am,” she said.

Miley has had multiple sclerosis for 13 years, using her wheelchair the last 10 years.

Before her diagnosis, she was an avid athlete — skiing, water-skiing and even sky-diving.

“I did anything and everything,” she said. “...I’d be the only girl on the block trying to go play baseball with the boys.”

After finding out about her condition, she was forced to adjust her lifestyle. She had not done any athletic activities until she started karate in October.

“That’s been the hardest part, finding something that I can do from the chair,” Miley said.

She moved to Kansas from Idaho in September 2004 to be closer to her children and grandchildren. Before then, Miley spent most of her life in California.

As a secretary at a chiropractic office, she met one of McDaniel’s students. He sponsored her at the American Karate Kenpo Academy Karate USA, located at 9637 W. 87th Street, Overland Park.

It piqued her interest and she continued. Miley had never done martial arts before.

McDaniel said, “When she does her bag work, she hits really hard, a lot harder than when she started ... she’s feeling more comfortable, capable with things.”

Kameron sees Miley in his classes and is used to her chair and “special balls.”

She lifts 3-pound medicine balls or 2-pound dumbbells when the class does calisthenics, likes sit-ups and pushups.

When the students partner up to practice throwing punches and blocking them, Miley doesn’t back away.

” McDaniel “I’ve never even heard her come close to saying ‘Go easy on me,’ ” said. “She’s usually one who says, ‘Bring it on a little bit more.’”

Miley understands the students concerns and tells them what is OK for her.

“Overall, they’ve pretty much gotten past that,” she said.

Miley’s goal now is to earn a black belt.

“She’ll be able to get there,” McDaniel said. “I’m very proud of her.”

### **NCO mentors through martial arts:**

From: <http://www.af.mil/news/story.asp?storyID=123019364>  
(April 24, 2006):

Once a gang member himself, an information manager with Detachment 2 of the 17th Test Squadron now uses kicks and punches to keep teenagers out of trouble.

To his co-workers at Cheyenne Mountain Air Force Station, Colo., he is Staff Sgt. Dave Armstrong. To his students at the Hillside Community Center in Colorado Springs, he is Sensei Dave.

At a martial-arts mentoring session April 11, Sergeant Armstrong led a class of nine students between 15 and 19 years old through the basics of Okinawan Kempo Karate and Judo.

“Where are your hands?” he asked one student. “Stay there, stay there, stay there.”

As he adjusted a student’s hand positions, he said, “They’re still pointed at your opponent.”

As a teen, Sergeant Armstrong grew up around gangs in Los Angeles. His misadventures landed him in a boys’ camp when he was 12. The camp first exposed him to martial arts.

“They had different cottages -- you had to work up to the honors cottage, which had the martial-arts program,” Sergeant Armstrong said. “I wanted to do it, so I worked my way up to the honors cottage and got started.”

The honors cottage instructor, Otto Johnson, told Sergeant Armstrong he had a knack for martial arts. Sergeant Armstrong so enjoyed learning martial arts that he gave up his former gang activity.

“It got me off the streets,” he said. “I spent a lot of time training; it became an everyday thing.”

When he turned 18, he began teaching martial arts for Sensei Otto. He now holds a third-degree black belt in Wado-Ryu Karate and second-degree black belts in Judo and Okinawan Kempo. He also has trained in Aikido and mixed martial-arts fighting.

He includes his family in his martial arts activities as well. His wife, Belinda, helps him with a youth karate program offered through local childcare centers. His 12-year-old son, David, holds a blue belt in Okinawan Kempo; his daughter, 10-year-old Susan, holds an orange belt.

But just teaching martial arts was not enough. So, Sergeant Armstrong began his mentoring program for at-risk youth about three months ago to give something back to teens who are in the same position he was in as a teen.

“I’ve always wanted to have a program like I have now for kids who are locked up or in group homes or foster homes,” he said. “God’s given me so much just for me to be alive, I can’t do anything with my time other than give back.”

“I’m committed to these guys, to show them how their lives can be and will be. That’s what I set out to do,” he said.

Eight to 10 teens participate in the program each week.

“It started off with four to five interested,” Sergeant Armstrong said. “It’s a challenge to get people interested because they’re teenagers; they have their own agenda. But these (students) are a great bunch of guys.”

The program took off once other teens had a chance to see how much fun the students were having.

“I’m getting a new student every week or so,” he said.

Because the mentoring takes place in an informal environment, the teens often do not realize they’re learning life lessons.

“They don’t know they’re being mentored,” he said. “What I’m doing is effective -- I know it is because it helped me. You’re around positive influences, and you don’t realize you’re improving until it’s done.”

Justus, 18, found out about the martial-arts mentoring through a local faith-based organization that provides mentoring, employment and fellowship for at-risk teens.

“(The class) teaches you self-defense, and it’s fun,” Justus said. “You get your energy out; it’s a good workout. And Sensei Dave helps you out if you don’t understand something.”

Sensei Dave is also a good role-model, Justus said. “He’s a big teddy bear. He’s 'gi-normous' on the outside, and on the inside, he’s a really nice guy.”

Sergeant Armstrong said he wants to expand his youth martial-arts mentoring program after he retires. He also is looking for others to volunteer their time as mentors.

“Right now I’m trying to find an instructor to come and train with me and eventually take over the program when I move,” Sergeant Armstrong said. “This is something I want to keep going forever.”

Although he has no plans to leave Colorado Springs in the near future, moving is part of living in the military.

“Anyplace I go, I’ll start the same program up there,” he said. “One of my goals is to

have a network of programs like this for at-risk youth to help them, because it got me off the streets.”

### **How I fought my way out of a lonely corner:**

From: <http://www.leadstoday.net/ViewArticle2.aspx?SectionID=39&ArticleID=1469525>  
(April 27, 2006):

At the age of 13 Ross Burgham was 6ft 2in tall, weighed 17 stones – and took up kick boxing.

There was no doubt that he could pack a mean punch, the trouble was he could not always control which direction it would travel.

Ross, now 18, was born with dyspraxia, an inability to coordinate movement. Although there are no obvious physical signs, to other people he would at times appear clumsy and awkward.

Years of consulting the experts did little to improve Ross's condition, for which there is no known cause or cure.

Rather it was gentle persuasion from his mum Maureen to give martial arts a go that was to change his life.

Five years on and Ross, from Armley, is a skilled kick boxing black belt, also trained in weaponry and French foot fighting.

For the first time in his life not only does he feel free from physical infliction, but he now has better hand-eye coordination than most people he knows.

Yet this is still a young man who will always live with a condition that made his early years a lonely place.

Ross said: "I would just stay in doors and watch telly. That was something I knew I was good at. I was tall, but I was really overweight. I didn't play sports or do much else.

"Obviously it isn't just the physical side, it's about self worth and confidence. I was often too scared to join in in case people would give me a hard time.

"I couldn't run very far or for long. I couldn't kick a football without looking ridiculous.

"It was down to mum that I gave kick boxing a go at all.

"Her gentle persuasion and encouragement. She noticed a change in me pretty much immediately. She said I changed totally, I was more relaxed, had more self control and was much more confident."

Ross, who goes to the National Martial Arts College's Armley School, added: "Kick boxing has been the best cure for me. I'll never be 100 per cent, but the difference is dramatic. Now I don't even notice it myself. Kick boxing has done what no

medication or treatment could do."

Chief master Tony Higo of the Armley martial art college said: "It is fair to say now that Ross is an ex-sufferer of dyspraxia.

"No-one with this level of physical skill can be said to be suffering from such a condition, and no-one can say this young man is not worth his black belt.

"He is a fine example to others and I am especially proud of him."  
Ross is now at Leeds Thomas Danby training in child care.

### **Getting her kicks:**

From:

<http://www.indystar.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20060428/LIVING/604280316/-1/ZONES04>  
(April 28, 2006):

Midlife beginner with lots of fighting spirit becomes a second-degree black belt

Who: Elmeria Davis, 57, a divorced mother of three, grandmother to seven, and great-grandma to six, who started taking martial-arts classes six years ago. She is a second-degree black belt preparing to test for her third degree in taekwondo. She entered her first competition the year her first great-grandchild was born. Since 2004, she has won two regional and one national championship in her age division (46 and up).

Personal: Davis, known to her friends as Miss El, lives on the Eastside with her Chow-German Shepherd mix, Beau Bear. She grew up in Cleveland and moved to Indianapolis to work at Methodist Hospital as a pediatric dietetic technician. She continues to work at Methodist in central distribution. She works out at least four times a week and teaches martial-arts classes to children as young as 3.

Why martial arts: "When my sister and mother died, I was grieving. I was hurt. I got a flier in the mail offering a month of free lessons. I was hooked."

Why not something less physical: "I was a cheerleader in high school, ran track and even tried to play touch football with the guys. I was always interested in running, jumping, hopping, skipping. My mom and sister were both on the heavy side. They had diabetes, hypertension and high cholesterol. Since I started with martial arts, I have brought my weight down 15 pounds, and my cholesterol is back to normal. Martial arts is a cross-training of kick-boxing, sparring and cardiovascular exercise that's a holistic approach to health -- mind, body and spirit."

About winning: "Oh, my goodness. It's exhilarating. It feels good to know I've won over younger women. Some think, 'Oh, here comes a little gray-haired lady. Let's be careful not to hurt her.' In class (she's the oldest), I've sparred with guys who are 6 feet tall and weigh 200 pounds. Age is a state of mind. It's all in the attitude."

Other hobbies: "I love to collect teddy bears. I have more than 2,000 bears in my collection. I was born a premie. Human hands didn't touch me for three months. I think that's why I like teddy bears. They are cute and cuddly. Once I got home and

around human contact, I shot straight up and people called me 'Olive Oyl,' because I was like a string bean."

Two things few know about you: "First, I bought new appliances for my kitchen in July, and I haven't used my oven yet. I'm too busy to cook. Second, I haven't missed a day on my job for 10 years and I've never been late for work. My parents taught me all about hard work and self-sacrifice."

Advice to women: "Do something for yourself that makes you feel pretty, healthy, strong and vibrant. I lean toward physical activity. If you don't use it, you lose it. I also fill my home with fresh flowers. I love nature and the freshness of outdoors."

Fun quote: "I love martial arts so much, I've already told my kids to bury me in my dress whites (karate uniform) when I die."

### **Ram is as persistent as his pain:**

From:

<http://www.delmarvanow.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20060430/SPORTS/604300333/1006>  
(April 30, 2006):

Parkside's Ryan Malone, who has spina bifida, keeps running

Salisbury -- After his race at Stephen Decatur High School on April 25, Parkside sprinter Ryan Malone called his mom.

"Are you OK?" she asked.

"I'm not in an ambulance on the way to the hospital, must be," he said.

"You're what?" Kathy Malone screamed. She didn't hear the word "not." Cell phones.

There was cause for concern, on her part anyway, because three weeks before, in a meet at Wicomico High School, Malone, a freshman, tripped on a rock and fell hard halfway into his 100-meter race. He bruised his knee and shoulder, scratched his face in several places, and his nose was bloodied and swollen. As he puts it, "My face got most of it."

Yet amidst all the ensuing commotion -- his worried mom rushing over from the stands, his teammates and coach hurrying over to make sure he wasn't seriously injured -- Malone was as fine as one could be in that situation. He even posed for a few pictures from his dad.

He was in pain, though. People usually don't go to the hospital when they're in tip-top physical shape. But pain is something Ryan Malone has to deal with everyday of his life.

Malone is one of 70,000 Americans diagnosed with spina bifida, a permanently disabling birth defect. It occurs during the first month of pregnancy when the spinal column does not close completely, exposing the nerves. Surgery is performed immediately, but by then the disease has already settled in.

The effect it has had on Malone focuses mainly on his knees, making it difficult for him to walk and even harder to run. Add on the fact that he's had multiple surgeries over the years, the last to rebuild his foot (he rolled his ankle over and had to have 11 bones cut, rotated and fused together just so he could walk "normal" again), and it would seem remarkable that he's even competing on the track.

But not if you know him.

He's a red belt in tae kwon do (which he says has helped his balance and his mom says his self-confidence), leads running warm-ups and stretches, practices every day his body allows, and never receives special treatment. He doesn't want it and doesn't need it. Whatever all the other sprinters do, he follows suit.

Most important, though, with all the obstacles he's had to overcome, not just over the years but in his daily life, Malone never gets down on himself.

"I ask him how he's doing, if he's excited, pumped up, and he always is. He always enthusiastic about it," Rams coach Galen Morres said. "He still gets a time (in his races) and each time he's trying to improve on it. He's always pushing himself. He never gets down."

Take a second and imagine watching him run. There's pain every time he walks, nevertheless runs, and yet he's drenched in sweat as if he were Olympic gold medalist Michael Johnson.

Inspirational? Just a slight bit.

"He's definitely inspirational," Morres said, "because the people who don't feel like rolling out of bed on a Saturday morning, but yet he still comes out here and runs. He does that extra work that most other people don't."

His teammates notice also.

"He definitely motivates me to do my best," sophomore sprinter Laura Robinson said. "There are people on the team who don't give it their all, and he does. He's really optimistic, and he tries his best every time he's out there. It's a good thing to have on the team, and it's a good motivation for the other kids."

And yet the Rams don't see Malone as some token figure of inspiration, someone they can look to on the sidelines when they're feeling down to lift their spirits. No, he's been embraced. He's just another one of the guys.

Take his fall at Wi-Hi, for example.

"The number of kids that stood by and patted him on the back, and somebody brought him a blanket over -- it was a really cold day and all he had was his little uniform on," Kathy said. "It was just a lot of support."

"It was awful, I felt really bad (about Malone's fall)," Robinson said. "But it was nice to see even kids from other teams cheer him and help him."

Amazing, isn't it, the number of lives he's touched? Who could have imagined it possible when he first asked to be a part of the team in November 2005? Not Morres.

"I wasn't too sure if he was going to be able to run just by watching him walk," he said. "So we started him out as manager during indoor, but once the first day of outdoor came, he decided he wanted to run, and after a few practices I saw him compete and I knew he'd be able to complete (his event)."

Malone's participation with the track team is, in actuality, a byproduct of the absence of gym from his class schedule. "I'm just trying to stay physical," he said.

"I think (my husband and I) actually thought that he wouldn't get hurt doing this," Kathy laughed. "(But) he wanted to get out there and try it, and when Galen has worked with him and all the other coaches, they really encouraged him and I'm just really happy that's he taken part."

Caution and concern always will surround Malone when he's competing. Morres admits to being extremely nervous upon his return to action at Decatur, and his mother says that when she can't get to the meets she's "a wreck."

And if he does happen to fall again?

"The way I think of it is, as soon as I start falling, I swerve into the grass," he said. "Might still get the bruises, but it's a softer landing."

This makes his mom laugh. And if you look hard enough, you won't just see joy on Kathy's face, but also relief. "He's a jokester," she said.

Malone plans to continue track throughout high school, although, from now on, he might just stick with indoor because of the softer track. Kathy's not going to push him to do anything, but does feel it's important for him to stay active, especially since his condition calls for him to use it or lose it.

Morres, however, probably gives the most accurate prediction.

"He'll have his work cut out," he said. "I know he's going to be out here the next three years. He's still going to work hard. His knees are still going to give him problems, but he's still going to come out here and work at whatever extra little bit he finds. He's always going to want to improve on his time; he's always going to want to get better."

At any point in his life, Ryan Malone could've said, "You know what? I'm content with who and what I am," and because of his condition, nobody would've said a word about it. But he's not content. And he never will be. That should say something.

### **Man convicted in 3-year-old domestic violence shooting case:**

From: [http://www.paysonroundup.com/section/frontpage\\_lead/story/23429](http://www.paysonroundup.com/section/frontpage_lead/story/23429)  
(May 12, 2006):

Manuel Diaz, who shot his estranged wife in the chest more than three years ago, has been convicted of attempted second degree murder and two counts of aggravated assault.

The conviction was handed down April 28.

Sentencing is scheduled for May 16 in front of Judge Peter Cahill. Diaz faces a possible sentence ranging from 7 to 23 years in the Arizona Department of Corrections.

Diaz's wife, Francisca Alatriz, then 46, of Star Valley, was in her car at 7:30 a.m. April 12, 2003 at the intersection of Moonlight Drive and Highway 260 when she was shot in the chest by her husband.

Manuel Diaz pulled alongside Francisca as she drove from her home in Star Valley to her job at the Mazatzal Casino. Francisca said she rolled down her window, thinking Diaz wanted to talk to her.

Instead, he pulled out a pistol and fired.

Alatriz remembers saying, "God help me," as the bullets penetrated her body. She managed to drive to the Circle K in Star Valley where she sought help.

"Diaz fired six rounds at her," said Det. Brian Havey of the Gila County Sheriff's Office.

Alatriz was hit twice, according to Havey. One bullet caused two wounds, entering and exiting her body, but resulted in only a superficial injury, he said. The second bullet remains in Alatriz's body because to remove it would cause nerve damage, the detective said.

Accounting for the other rounds, "Three hit the driver's side door and one hit the opposite side door," Havey said.

This was the first documented shooting related to domestic violence in the area, a spokesperson for the Time Out Shelter for victims of domestic violence said at the time of the incident.

Since the shooting, Alatriz has been vocal about domestic violence.

In December 2005, she and her two children, Leticia and Victor, qualified to compete in perhaps one of the largest and most prestigious martial arts tournaments. She intends to use the international forum to bring attention to domestic violence.

"A lady of her age and bullet wounds -- two near fatal -- to take up an endeavor such as karate is amazing," said Roscoe Dabney, Tonto Apache Tribe police officer.

Through the whole ordeal of the shooting, recovery, waiting for the trial and finally seeing Diaz convicted, the Alatriz family stayed positive and focused through martial arts.

"It (has become) more than a sport. It became our way out of domestic violence," Leticia said.

Victor followed his sister's passion a few years after she began; and after recovering from her gunshot wounds, Francisca joined her children at the sport two years ago.

The Alatriz family practices a Korean form of martial arts, called Hwa Rang Do, with master Chris Bailey at the Karate-Kung Fu Center.

Victor and Leticia wear green sashes -- the fourth level of mastery. Alatriz competes on the third level of Hwa Rang Do and wears the yellow sash.

"My death would have been senseless," Francisca said. "I'd rather die in the ring. "Domestic violence is something that is so serious," she said. "Unfortunately, it happens every day."

In addition to fighting for battered women, she is writing a book about her life. She plans to donate proceeds to victims.

### **Blind Camp Verde teen to earn black belt Family and 12 others get ready for Tae Kwon Do test in Sedona:**

From:

<http://verdeindependent.iupsoftware.com/main.asp?SectionID=1&SubSectionID=1&ArticleID=19590&TM=25261.07>  
(May 20, 2006):

When a 16-year old Camp Verde 10th-grader, his brother and mom walked in to join a class at Tae Kwon Do Unlimited a few years ago, many would never have thought they could get to where they are today on the cusp of earning tae kwon do black belts.

That doesn't sound so hard to believe, except when you introduce yourself to the tall muscular guy in cool sunglasses, you realize he can't see -- not a thing.

Blake Tucker has been blind since birth. His blindness certainly hasn't stopped him from accomplishing many tough goals in his life. He even owns a car, which is a Tucker family tradition upon turning 16-years-old.

On Saturday, May 27, at the Radisson Poco Diablo in Sedona, Blake, his mother, brother and 12 others get to put their years of hard work to the test at TKD Unlimited of Cottonwood's Black Belt Exam. At noon the candidates will be asked to demonstrate for the audience, their forms, kicks, combinations, sparring and self-defense techniques, as well as speak publicly on the subject of "What Jhoon Rhee Tae Kwon Do Has Done for Me."

The three-hour exam is the final step in an intensive training program. They were also required to complete a two-day pre-test exam a few weeks ago, and throughout the last 6-months, a rigorous schedule of teaching two days per week, running a 6-mile mountain course two days a week and attending regular tae kwon do classes three times per week.

"It certainly wasn't easy over the last months for me and my boys, but I couldn't be

prouder of my sons and everyone who's made it this far," said Kathy Tucker, Blake's mom.

Presiding over the testing is world-renowned martial artist and speaker, 10-degree Grand Master Jhoon Rhee, who is known best as the "Father of American Tae Kwon Do."

Grand Master Jhoon Rhee is traveling here from Washington, D.C., where he is the highest ranking member and founder of Jhoon Rhee International, a system of modern tae kwon do of which TKD Unlimited is a part and in which "honesty, respect, and friendship" are the main tenets.

Jhoon Rhee has taught martial arts to senators, congressman, and has trained with Muhammed Ali and Bruce Lee to name only a few. Well known for his contributions to American educational programs, he is the creator of the National Teacher Appreciation Day that was signed into law by President Ronald Reagan.

Other students testing for black belt include TKD Unlimited Instructors Caleb Labarda (age 21), going for third degree, and Karen Conover (age 35) and Charlie Labarda (age 49) going for second degree. In addition, student members at TKD Unlimited going for second degree are brothers, Craig (age 14) and Daniel Prendiville (age 16), and Sabrina Ortiz (age 13). A record nine other student members of the school are testing for first-degree black belt.

They include: Blake Tucker (age 16), Chad Tucker (age 12), Kathy Tucker (age 41), Chuck Conover (Age 41), Noel Lindhurst (Age 26), Nate Hetrick (Age 18), Ember Rusco (Age 18), Kim Ward (Age 16), and Ricky Hernandez (Age 14).

"This is a great group, the biggest and most diverse we've ever had at a black belt test. Having Grand Master Rhee test us is such an honor, and we will never forget this opportunity in our lives. Anyone interested in supporting us or hearing Grand Master Jhoon Rhee speak should come and join us. It's going to be amazing," says Charlie Labarda, owner and instructor at TKD Unlimited.

Anyone can call 649-1530 for more information on purchasing tickets for the event.

The black belt candidates at TKD Unlimited would like to thank the following businesses and individuals who have so generously donated funds to help bring Grand Master Rhee to Arizona: Aero Bear Aviation, Jerome Jewelry Market, Coldwell Banker Mabery Real Estate, Arts Painting and Elastometrics,

Yavapai Broadcasting, Dr. Robert Gagliano and Family, and A.D. Hill Landscape Materials, among many, many others.

### **Gifted warriors:**

From:

<http://www.goupstate.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=/20060521/NEWS/605210345/1028/LIFE>  
(May 21, 2006):

Boiling Springs -- Mike Darcy is an imposing figure at 6-foot-4 and 275 pounds. He's a former petty officer second class in the U.S. Navy who considers himself a guarded man.

That's every day, except for Friday evenings between 5 and 7 o'clock.

For nearly a year, Darcy, 46, has taught karate to kids with special needs. Twenty-five kids are taking his classes. Some are diagnosed with autism and Down syndrome; once he even had a student in a wheelchair.

The kids' parents have seen them show more self-confidence and improved coordination. And sometimes, Darcy sees them try something for the first time.

Friday "is the best day of the week," Darcy said.

Darcy's younger sister, Tammy, 36, is diagnosed with Down syndrome. She's a black belt and has lost 100 pounds since she started taking karate six years ago.

She often wins against what Darcy calls "normal people" when sparring.

Growing up, Darcy took karate lessons. Later, he encouraged Tammy, who took lessons at Spartanburg Martial Arts Academy. That led him to teach others with special needs.

Tammy has been receiving martial arts instructions from the Spartanburg Martial Arts Academy's Boiling Springs studio and Darcy talked to the academy's owners about a class for children with special needs. They agreed to let him lead it.

They began with three students from families Darcy knew. They post fliers about the classes at doctors' offices and outside stores. Tammy also has performed demonstrations at events to attract students.

Families are charged \$5 per child, a discount Darcy said is needed for families because of the expenses associated with special-needs children.

Danny Gosnell and his son Adam Gosnell, 13, saw Tammy in a demonstration at Boiling Springs First Baptist Church. Danny Gosnell thought the class would be a good way for Adam to socialize and get some physical activity. It took him a few months, but Adam decided to give it a try, and now he's benefiting.

"Adam has improved his stamina and coordination and most of all his confidence," his dad said. "He's willing to participate and engage rather than say, 'I don't want to and I can't.' "

Dana Simmons' daughter, Katelyn, 10, is also showing improvement. Katelyn is diagnosed with Pervasive Developmental Disorder, a milder form of autism. Simmons said Katelyn had coordination problems and was reluctant to participate in physical education at school until she took karate for a few months.

"She'll lay out her uniform before school and wants to bring friends," said Simmons said of her daughter. "Nothing can replace that look in her eyes."

The students earn belts and learn self-defense tactics. They're not allowed to spar with each other and many times they'll do exercises aimed at improving their flexibility and coordination that you might not see in other martial arts classes. There's a 45-minute class for kids 9 and older and a 45-minute class for kids 4 to 9.

Jason Coggins, 16, is easily distracted and meets one-on-one with Darcy. Coggins, who is diagnosed with autism, will sometimes do sit-ups or catch a ball or reach for it to improve his ability to grip. He also gets a chance to walk and jog laps around the room. He's considered nonverbal, but has expanded his vocabulary to "bye-bye," "ball" and "Mike."

Marcia Gibson, Coggins' caretaker, said he hadn't gotten any form of physical therapy in three years and that she can see a difference.

"He stays still longer and is more in control," Gibson said.

Simmons and Gosnell like Darcy's teaching style.

"Mike understands because of his sister," Gosnell said.

Darcy has 10 volunteer instructors, including Tammy and his 15-year-old daughter Alisha. When he steps outside for a couple of minutes, an instructor will usually come and get him when a student stops participating or starts misbehaving. He'll come in and will talk the student about what they should be doing. He uses a serious tone of voice with them and follows them around the room.

"They would rather do anything than disappoint Mike," said Carol Smith, who has a niece participating in classes and a grandson helping Darcy teach.

"He understands they need to be pushed, but understands that you have to respect their disability," Simmons said.

Darcy said he gets just as much from the kids he calls "Gifted Warriors."

Darcy and some his students were going to participate in a Christmas parade when he learned that his best friend of more than 20 years died from a heart attack. He didn't feel like participating in the parade, but one of the students came over to speak to him with a smile on her face and it made him feel better.

"I said, 'Marisa, you're my miracle,' " he said. "You made my pain go away, even though it's temporary because I still have the funeral."

### **Courage, determination help man master martial art:**

From:

<http://www.nj.com/news/expresstimes/nj/index.ssf?/base/news-2/1148271131285220.xml&coll=2>  
(May 22, 2006):

Bob Bennett refuses to let something like cerebral palsy stand in the way of his dreams. He loves tae kwan do and was willing to do anything to earn a black belt in the martial art.

The 31-year-old Hackettstown native trained every night for four years, practicing his technique and perfecting his moves.

"A lot of people thought I couldn't do it. And that's what made me want to keep trying," Bennett said. "Getting a black belt was a big goal in my life. When I finally got it, it felt like I had accomplished something great. It was the experience of a lifetime."

Bennett earned his black belt this spring. His dedication and enthusiasm caught the eye of not just his fellow students, but also of Cerebral Palsy of New Jersey. The nonprofit organization recently awarded Bennett the Andrew J. Murphy Award to honor his courage, determination and confidence.

"Andrew J. Murphy was born severely disabled and never let his physical limitations prevent him from doing what able-bodied people were doing," agency Executive Director Jack Mudge said in a statement. "He inspired his family, friends, and fellow students to reach for the stars and to achieve whatever goals they set for themselves."

After being diagnosed with cerebral palsy, the doctors tried everything to improve and repair the damage to Bennett's right side, which had been affected by the disease.

"Nothing else worked for me," Bennett said. "The doctors tried everything they could, but nothing worked. But I loved tae kwan do and wanted to do it even though I had a disability."

Bennett received his award at a special dinner ceremony held last month in Lawrenceville, N.J.

Bennett plans to continue with tae kwan do and to teach classes to other students who share his love of the art. He offers this advice to all of his future students:

"Just keep trying and don't give up," he said. "Amazing things can when you don't stop trying."

### **Hero pair save bridge jumper:**

From:

[http://www.thisisoxfordshire.co.uk/display.var.769279.0.hero\\_pair\\_save\\_bridge\\_jumper.php](http://www.thisisoxfordshire.co.uk/display.var.769279.0.hero_pair_save_bridge_jumper.php)

(May 23, 2006):

Two passers-by who stopped a man jumping off a motorway bridge have been praised by police.

Nightclub owner Reg Howe and judo champ Roland Newson risked their own lives to prevent the 52-year-old man from taking his own life.

Mr Howe kept the man talking as they waited for the police to arrive, while judo expert Mr Newson used his martial arts skills to throw him to safety.

The man was trying to leap on to the M40 from the bridge between Twyford and Kings Sutton in the early hours of Sunday morning.

Mr Howe, the owner of Confessions in South Bar, was first on the scene.

He said: "I was driving home to Kings Sutton at about 3am when I saw this guy with one leg over the bridge railings.

"He was drunk and had a big bottle of whisky in his hand and I thought he was going to jump.

"I stopped and tried to talk him out of it.

"The motorway was still busy and I was worried both for his own safety and for drivers on the road below.

"I was there for about five minutes and was talking to him and calling the police at the same time.

"Then another car stopped and a guy who said he was a judo expert came to help.

"I kept talking and after 10 minutes or so the other guy managed to pull the man to safety."

The other man was Roland Newson, a former Banbury hairdresser, who now lives in France, and was back in Banbury to visit his parents.

He said: "I had just dropped a friend off in Charlton and was heading back to town.

"I passed two people on the bridge, one with a bottle of whisky and looking as though he was trying to jump.

"I thought about it and realised the potential danger to drivers on the M40 either from the man himself going through a windscreen, or his whisky bottle doing the same.

"I turned round and went back, and the man I now know as Reg explained the situation. I decided to use my judo skills if the chance came.

"Reg kept him talking and I waited for an opportunity to grab the man and pull him back. The man had a walkman and one of the earpieces came out and distracted him.

"As he looked down, I caught his arm and judo-threw him to safety."

"A few minutes later the police arrived."

Tim Wiseman, spokesman for Thames Valley Police, said: "The man making the suicide attempt had been reported missing from home about 20 minutes before we received the call from Mr Howe.

"When officers arrived the man was swearing, was hostile, and wanted to jump. He was taken to the Horton Hospital in Banbury.

"Mr Howe and Mr Newson acted bravely and no doubt saved the man's life.

"They also prevented a possible tragedy on the M40.

"They put themselves in danger. If things had gone wrong, the man could have taken either or both of them with him."

### **UFC to host one-legged champion wrestler at UFC 60 this weekend:**

From: <http://www.intermatwrestle.com/news/newsdisplay.aspx?ID=4018>  
(May 24, 2006):

Ultimate Fighting Championships (UFC) will host Anthony Robles, a national champion wrestler born with just one leg, at their UFC 60 event at The Staples Center in Los Angeles, Calif. on Saturday, May 27. During the event, Anthony will be honored by the UFC for his amazing accomplishments.

The UFC brings together the some of the top mixed martial arts competitors in a world to compete in a controlled environment. Many of the top UFC stars are former elite-level wrestlers, including Randy Couture, Matt Lindland, Tito Ortiz and Matt Hughes, who will fight in the UFC 60's feature bout.

Born with just one leg, 17 year-old Anthony Robles of Mesa, Ariz. capped off an amazing career on March 26 by winning the National High School Coaches Association (NHSCA) national title at 112 lbs. with a 9-1 victory in the finals. The NHSCA invites only seniors in high school who won state titles to its national meet. Robles became the first disabled wrestler to win a title at the NHSCA national championships.

The win also finished off a perfect 53-0 senior season for him. For his four-year career, he posted a record of 131-15 and won two Arizona state titles. He was also undefeated as a junior.

Amazingly, Anthony never wrestled until his family moved from just outside of Los Angeles to Mesa before his freshman year. He aspires to someday compete in mixed martial arts after he completes his collegiate wrestling career at Arizona State Univ., where he will study Business.

Recently, Anthony has been featured on ESPN's Cold Pizza, CNN, Fox News Channel's Fox & Friends and this week will be featured on ABC World News Tonight as their Person of the Week. He is expected to be nominated for a 2006 ESPY Award for Best Disabled Athlete.

### **Maluafiti-Buendia falls for judo:**

From: <http://www.mauinews.com/story.aspx?id=20071>  
(May 25, 2006):

Wailuku, Hawaii – Treaven Maluafiti-Buendia used to think judo was a sport that didn't quite fit his image. Now, after two state medals in just two years of practicing the centuries-old sport, he can't get enough of it.

The 18-year-old soon-to-be Maui High School graduate wishes he had discovered the sport earlier.

“It hasn’t even been two years, only like four months really, because the season is so short,” Maluafiti-Buendia said. “I love it. I bleed and sweat this sport. There are so many different styles, and so much technique. It is hard to explain. It is like a relaxed sport, but really competitive at the same time.”

Maluafiti-Buendia went into the state tournament last week at the Stan Sheriff Center as the No. 1 seed at 220 pounds, based mainly on his fifth-place finish from last year. He lost his first match, but came back with five straight wins to get the third-place medal this season.

All of those wins came via an ippon, the judo equivalent to a pin in wrestling.

Wrestling is a sport where he has also been competing at the high school level for two years and he was a Maui Interscholastic League champion this season. He also played football for the Sabers until he dislocated his right shoulder in a first-round game against Kamehameha Maui midway through the 2005 season.

Judo, however, is the sport that has changed his life. A student who struggled with grades and attitude through his sophomore year, Maluafiti-Buendia is now a B student who will attend Maui Community College in the fall. He wants to continue his judo career in college and sees San Jose State as a possible destination after two years at MCC.

“I regret not going out for judo my freshman year, but I thought it was kind of a sissy sport,” Maluafiti-Buendia said. “My friends, Fernand (Baldonado) and J.J. (Dollopac) got me into it.”

Baldonado and Dollopac were among five Saber boys who came home with state medals, each finishing sixth at 145 and 161, respectively.

Losing his first match at state only made Maluafiti-Buendia more determined.

“I really wanted to win that state championship this year, so when I lost I was really salty,” he said. “I just killed the next guy and went out to get ready for my next match.”

That kind of determination drove Maluafiti-Buendia all season, coach Glenn Agunat said.

“This year he was a little more focused,” Agunat said. “His technique actually improved a whole lot and he added more technique to his repertoire. His fighting experience is really limited and there weren’t many opponents on Maui for him this season. He stepped up his technique and added a lot more to his mental preparation. He was a lot more focused.”

Maluafiti-Buendia said the sport where he fights on the mat has helped him stop fighting off of it.

“This sport keeps you humble,” he said. “When people want to fight you on the street, you just leave them alone. We are fighting every day practicing, so why do you want to fight on the street? It doesn’t make sense. I used to get in fights and not go to class, all the bad things. Judo and wrestling, because I wanted to compete, so I needed the grades, so I had to go to class. It has really helped me straighten out my life. Plus my friends always tell me to leave it on the mat, so I don’t do it on the street anymore.

“I am a different person now, more relaxed, more quiet. When guys look at me now, I don’t care anymore.”

While he will leave Maui High as a student in a couple of weeks, he vows to stay with the sport through the Maui Hongwanji Judo Club and he will be back with the Sabers as an assistant coach next year.

His bronze medal is the highest place ever achieved by a Saber judoka. His attitude about that shows how much the sport has helped him grow.

“That makes me feel good, but I didn’t care how I did,” he said. “I wanted everybody else to place and do well. I am going to miss all of this so much. I am going to cry when I graduate. This is my family right here. I am going to come back next year to help out the next generation.”

### **'I must make them believe':**

From: [http://sgvtribune.com/news/ci\\_3879216](http://sgvtribune.com/news/ci_3879216)  
(May 30, 2006):

Glendora - For three months, Alex Plascencia sat in the reception area of a local martial arts studio, watching other children with physical and mental disabilities practice karate.

One day, he moved his chair into the dojo, the Japanese word for a training center. For another five days, the 17-year-old Walnut High School student watched, his mother Ofelia Plascencia said.

Then he participated.

"I don't know why, but one day he got up and performed. I started to cry for my son, to do that is awesome," Plascencia said.

Alex, 6 feet tall and 200 pounds, is autistic, epileptic and suffers from cerebral palsy. He was responding to Anthony C. Marquez Sr., a seventh-degree black belt and kyoshi, the Japanese word for master teacher.

"Kyoshi has this gift with children," she said.

Marquez says he started Possibilities Unlimited International to use karate to help children with physical and cognitive problems.

His own challenge, he says, is to reach the child who can't see, can't hear or can't walk.

"I take them at their current level and achieve a higher level of mind, body and spirit," said Marquez, a Vietnam veteran and retired master sergeant with the U.S. Air Force. "There is no time range. I get them to see themselves as a person with unlimited possibilities."

His students include blind children who learned to jump rope - no small feat.

"It took four months," said Sebastian Mancipe, 11, who has earned his blue belt. "It was hard before I learned."

Others rely on wheelchairs, but learn to accept their disabilities and move on, Marquez says.

Parents bring their kids to him and he watches them grow.

It doesn't happen overnight, Marquez, 57, said.

Covina resident Gerardo Rodriguez goes to Possibilities Unlimited with his 5-year-old daughter, Jessica, a student at Glenoaks Elementary School who suffers from Down syndrome and who has earned her yellow belt.

"Jessica used to jump with her whole body, she didn't bend her legs." Rodriguez said.

"Look at her, she's doing it much better here than at school and it helps her keep her balance. That's a big deal."

Children with Down syndrome, cerebral palsy, spina bifida, deafness, polio and autism come two hours a day each week to the Glendora academy.

At the Braille Institute Los Angeles, where Marquez works with two dozen 6- to 19-year-olds, self-esteem is on the rise, said spokeswoman Rocio Vallejos.

"The program started with a lot of little ones without self-confidence, afraid to try new things," Vallejos said. "Many now realize this is a sport not only for sighted people."

Vallejos said she has seen students shed their nervous, shy behavior and become more focused.

Marquez, who was born in Puerto Rico and came to California from New York City, lived in Azusa for 18 years. He and his wife moved to the high desert of San Bernardino County last year.

He was approached years ago to volunteer his time and couldn't say no. He has inspired others to do the same.

When a young man asked if he could teach some children what he learned from Marquez as a requirement for his bar mitzvah, the karate master was touched.

"That was a big moment," said Marquez. "He wanted to teach others; that made me proud. My work came full circle."

Marquez said "love and respect" are the secret to his success.

"I love the kids, love what I do, have a passion and a gift," he said.

Marquez said he gives his student a vision of possibilities, the power to accept themselves and feel good about it.

"I infuse kids with my passion, which is contagious. I must make them believe in things that seem unbelievable. I think we call that `faith.'"

### **Boy with autism finds outlet in martial arts:**

From: <http://www.app.com/apps/pbcs.dll/article?AID=2006606030314>  
(June 3, 2006):

When Jennifer Zeller saw her 8-year-old autistic son receive three first-place trophies at a karate tournament, she knew she had done the right thing.

"I was so tearful with joy and don't think I have ever been more touched and proud at the same time," Zeller wrote in a letter to the editor in hopes it would encourage parents in similar situations to let their children try new activities.

"The Grandmaster called over a team of judges from another ring to come over and 'judge,' while he himself took my son Nikolas to the ring and personally administered his three events privately before the other children arrived at the ring. Nikolas was beside himself with glee when the judges all gave him "8.os,' " Zeller wrote.

Zeller, who lives in Lacey Township's Forked River section, enrolled Nikolas in the Kum Sung karate school on Hooper Avenue in the Toms River section of Dover Township.

"Martial arts are good for special-needs kids. I felt it would be good for him," Zeller said in an interview May 20.

She and her son were turned down at another school. According to Zeller, the instructors there said Nikolas monopolized their time and they didn't feel they could meet his needs.

At Kum Sung, it was a different story.

"The owner, she was so open. She never even gave it a second thought," Zeller said.

Youn Kum Sung runs Kum Sung Martial Arts, which has several locations, with her husband, who goes by Master Kum Sung because he said his first name can be a bit confusing.

Master Kum Sung said his teaching philosophy focuses on the physical, mental and spiritual aspects of martial arts, and respect for others is the first thing taught.

"We stress equality. If you don't respect other people, then you don't respect yourself," Master Kum Sung said.

Lack of respect leads to anger and violence, which is especially dangerous when combined with martial arts techniques, he said.

Nikolas is treated no differently from any other child his age, Kum Sung said. He said about 80 percent of his students, and even some instructors, are classified as special needs in some way, including attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and Down syndrome.

Kum Sung said that learning a martial art is good for people with special needs because "it helps them to feel confident. They know they don't fit in or are a little slow. When they learn a martial art, it makes them feel proud. They fit in."

And Nikolas appears to have found his niche.

"He feels just like the other kids," Zeller said.

Some of the other students in the class are taking a liking to him, such as one girl whose brother has autism.

"She's taken it upon herself to mentor him," Zeller said.

According to Kum Sung, Nikolas also might feel just like everyone else because of how his parents treat him.

"Sometimes it's the parents who are being handicapped by babying their children. Nikolas's parents do a wonderful job," he said. "They ask for no special favors." He also said that Nikolas earned those trophies himself.

"He is very excited to learn. He is eager to learn. He is just like any other kid," Master Kum Sung said.

Still, Zeller is touched by what Master Kum Sung did at the tournament.

"I think everyone who saw it was proud even if they didn't know Nikolas. It was so surprising to me that someone with hundreds of students there took the time to personally give my son his own mini tournament before the other kids arrived so he could get "first place!" Zeller wrote in her letter.

"I think the Kum Sungs deserve to be recognized for their human compassion. . . . I would love for them to get a newspaper write-up with how they gave my son Nikolas a better gift than anything you can wrap in a box with a bow — acceptance and self-esteem!"