

Martial arts Grandmaster back at dojo a month after heart transplant

Thursday, October 23, 2008

by Maria Sciuolo, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette



Pam Panchak/Post-Gazette

Judo/Tae Kwon Do Grandmaster Kyu Ha Kim, of Green Tree, at his Dojo in Brentwood, PA.

As a youth in Korea, Kyu Ha Kim was known as "The Tree." A two-time all-Korea national judo champ and eventual martial arts grandmaster, Mr. Kim was a striking presence on the mat at 6 feet, 2 inches tall and 210 pounds.

Word has it he once defeated, one after the other, 40 American judo black belt holders while working as an instructor at a military base in Oklahoma.

Yet after a lifetime of training, competition and teaching, Mr. Kim's greatest physical achievement might be this current, quiet work in progress.

"After he had his heart transplant, I couldn't believe this: I guess three weeks or a month later, he was back at the club," said one of his longtime students, Upper St. Clair police Chief Ron Pardini.

After a harrowing 18 months of heart problems leading to his remarkable recovery after surgery, Mr. Kim, 73, is reclaiming his old life, but got something more in the process.

While he was laid up, about 50 of his students at [Kim's Martial Arts and Fitness Studio](#) in Brentwood completed a major renovation of the facility, purchasing and installing new flooring and tatami (mats), cleaning, painting, installing security and sound equipment as well as a new computerized records system.

"That's the amazing thing about this group of students, and it is a credit to him, the relationships he builds with his students," said Eugene Kim, the grandmaster's son, himself a fifth-degree black belt and instructor who runs the family's other dojo, in Cranberry, PA.



Pam Panchak/Post-Gazette

Kyu Ha Kim with his son Eugene, and his grandsons, Tanner 11, and Tyler 13.

"He has students he taught 30 and 40 years ago, and they still keep in touch. It is truly a family feeling to this dojo."

Mr. Kim, who doesn't smoke or drink and is one of fewer than a dozen living ninth-degree black belts in the world, developed idiopathic cardiomyopathy as the result of a virus.

The deterioration of his heart required doctors to insert a pacemaker in July 2007. Staph infections led to lengthy hospital stays.

"It was just an awful, awful year," Eugene Kim said.

Initial inquiries about the possibility of a transplant were discouraging. His age, not his extraordinary fitness, was considered the bigger factor.

"Finally, though the whole process, we ended up at UPMC, that's where we ran into these wonderful doctors who put him through another battery of tests and said he could be a candidate," Eugene Kim said.

His surgeon, Christian Bermudez, said that UPMC has performed roughly 1,200 heart transplants since 1980, but only "15 or 20" with circumstances similar to Mr. Kim's.

"We don't do it routinely, for ethical issues, but we have considered patients who are beyond the [usual] physical age," Dr. Bermudez said.

"This is certainly something we do selectively."

According to the Mayo Clinic, up to 4,000 people are on heart transplant waiting lists in the United States each day, and the wait for a proper match can be weeks or months.

"We had heard stories of people put on lists for years and dying while waiting," Eugene Kim said. "I really wasn't sure how optimistic I could be when they put him on the list."

Finding a donor heart took two weeks. The heart had been turned down by someone higher on the list because there were signs of mild coronary disease.

"Sometimes, there are small details that might preclude use with a regular candidate, but we have learned those hearts can work well," Dr. Bermudez said.

"I trust my medical doctors so much," said Mr. Kim. "They came to me and said, 'We can do this tomorrow morning,' and I took the chance."

Still, the high-risk surgery ran about 10 hours, longer than usual due to a bleeding issue. The surgery began on the morning of Saturday, June 28. By Sunday evening, Mr. Kim was alert and, his son said, had an appetite.

"By Monday, they had him standing. What he's doing is amazing. They attribute that to the lifestyle he's led up to this point," Eugene Kim said.

"He did remarkably well," Dr. Bermudez said.

Standing in the hallway next to tall windows looking in on the upstairs dojo, Mr. Kim could easily pass for a much younger man. Tall, with jet-black hair, he is pretty much the picture of someone who once dominated the sport of judo.

His parents were farmers, their home a rural section of land about 100 miles south of what is now Seoul, South Korea.

After the Korean War, American soldiers who remained often took martial arts training under local instructors. Mr. Kim also trained members of the Korea air force.

His success at the national level cemented his reputation, which led to an invitation to teach judo in Oklahoma in the early 1960s.

In 1964, he came to the Pittsburgh and raised a family in Green Tree. Eugene has two sons --both of whom are students of tae kwon do -- and Mr. Kim's daughter, Mary, runs a fitness studio in Boston and has three children.



Kyu Ha Kim in 1966 at the Y.M.H.A. in Pittsburgh.

One of Mr. Kim's earliest students eventually attended the University of Pittsburgh, where he persuaded the grandmaster to start the school's judo program. The relationship at Pitt has lasted 34 years, and when Mr. Kim feels up to it, he plans to resume teaching in Oakland again.

That same student, [Gary Goltz](#), has gone on to establish his own successful martial arts school in Southern California and heads up the US Judo Association. Mr. Goltz was also instrumental in persuading Mr. Kim to go forward with the heart transplant.



Gary Goltz on his visit to see Mr. Kim last month.

Heart transplantation involves following a strict regime of physical rehabilitation and medical attention. Every few weeks, for now, he must undergo a biopsy of heart tissue to ensure his body is not rejecting the organ.

Ursula Reis, his fiancé, has helped him through the ordeal and keeps track of the myriad procedures, appointments and medications. "I write everything down," she said, laughing.

His spirits are high, say his students. "They have given him a new lease on life, literally," said longtime student Chris Moore, 57, of Peters "He looks incredible now; his health is just so much better." He's been with the grandmaster for 24 years.

Chris McMahan, of Mt. Lebanon, was 8 when his mother brought him to Mr. Kim for self-defense lessons. Now 43, he and his five children drive to Brentwood for judo and tae kwon do classes. "No matter where you go in the South Hills, everyone has taken lessons from Mr. Kim," Mr. McMahan said.

The idea and execution of renovating the facility was a group effort, he said. The Brentwood dojo has about 100 students, at least half of whom helped in some way. "Mr. Kim is the greatest, and we wanted to do something for him," said Mr. McMahan, who helped spearhead the project with Larry Driscoll and Mr. Moore.

Many others were generous with their time and money, said Ms. Reis, fearing she'd leave someone out with an extensive list. Mr. Kim, for his part, said he's grateful. But the renovation wasn't his idea; his needs are not elaborate.

"You've got to remember where he came from," said his son. "After the war, the country was just war-torn. In the dojo where he was training, they didn't have [glass in the] windows; there was snow blowing in. The muddy streets weren't paved; it was freezing in the winter, stifling hot in the summer.

"But they didn't care. All they wanted to do was train."

"Grandmaster Kim is truly old school. There was always one mat, and that was all one needed," said Mr. Moore, who nonetheless helped plan and install the new, springier floor in Brentwood.

The renovations are ongoing, he said: "We just got together last week to talk about the second phase, although the lion's share is completed." His students say they're happy to help.

"He doesn't just teach the sport of judo, he instills character, ethics, morality," said USC Chief Pardini, who, with former local FBI agent Bob Voge, helped sponsor Mr. Kim for U.S. citizenship. "I've seen him angry, but you'd never know it. He has a soft way of getting everything across."