

TAEKWONDO AT THE TUCKER RECREATION CENTER

An Interview with Lakeside High
Alumni Master Wallace Taylor

By Sheila Elwin

I was looking for an activity for a lively 4-year-old when I heard about the Taekwondo program at Tucker Recreation Center. Shortly after enrolling him, my husband decided to return to the sport of his 20s, and he also joined the program. Not to be left behind, and with a mission of personal fitness, I overcame my fear and signed up.

It turned out to be a great move for all of us, and now we're a Tucker Taekwondo family. My husband has been impressed with the expertise and mission of the teacher. I was relieved at his gentle approach to rank beginners. We've both been pleased to watch our son grow in coordination, self-esteem, and self-control.

Master Wallace Taylor, a 4th degree black belt, has taught Taekwondo at the Tucker Recreation Center since August 2007, and became the martial arts coordinator about a year ago. I recently asked him if I could interview him for Up Close Magazine and he consented. His mission, as well as the opportunities that Tucker Taekwondo has to offer the community, is shared in this interview:

Sheila Elwin: Master Taylor, tell us a little about Tucker Taekwondo and its students.

Wallace Taylor: We have more than 100 students at the school. Classes meet Monday through Saturday, and they are open to all members of the community. We have students ranging in age from preschoolers to adults, and they reflect a diverse population.

What is the class format like?

Classes are grouped into four age groups. First is Little Dragons, age 4-6. Then we have the new beginner program, which is generally the kids from about 7 to 11, and that's usually white to yellow belt. There's some degree of overlap in the other class, which is intermediate students. They are from about green belt to blue belt; age range can be anywhere from 7 to 14. There is another advanced class, basically a repetition of the previous,



Tucker Taekwondo students surpassed all expectations when they brought home 30 medals and trophies from their first open tournament.

Photo Credit: Suchi Patton

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which is upper levels (blue, green, brown belts), but at a different time for convenience. The recently implemented adult program is Monday and Wednesday evening, and is for 19 and older.

Do you do different things on different days?

Monday and Tuesday we do Poomse, or traditional forms; Wednesday and Thursday we do Gyorooogi, or sparring. Friday classes are usually reserved for specialty. We've used it to prepare for the tournament, but now that is over, we'll use it for training in weaponry, including Shinkendo, which is the traditional art of Japanese swordsmanship; and Bojutsu, which is staff fighting. Saturdays also include an intermediate class and a new beginning class for all ages.

You mentioned a diverse student population earlier.

Yes. They are diverse in age – from 4-year-olds up to the adult class where the majority of the class is from 35 to early 50s. And their backgrounds also reflect

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Thirteen are currently in the adult Taekwondo classes at Tucker Rec.

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a diverse population. As well as maybe 45 to 50 percent American-born, there are students from many countries of origin: Ethiopia, Kenya, Argentina, Peru, Iran, Germany, Ivory Coast, England, Russia, Senegal, Guyana, Canada, Mexico, Vietnam, India, Panama, Jamaica, Trinidad & Tobago, China, Korea, Chile, Puerto Rico, Thailand.

And what about you? Where are you from?

I was born in what was British Guyana. When I was 8 years old, my parents moved to the US Virgin Islands for four years, and finally to Georgia in 1988 so that my mother could further her education at Emory University.

How did you get involved in Taekwondo?

My original interest was Aikido, which I started at age 16. I think I was a little too young for Aikido, and I wanted a martial art that was more physical. So, I was in Tucker after school one day, and I drove by a Taekwondo school and went in. I was almost 17 when I had my first Taekwondo class. I was the only non-Korean. The classes were taught in Korean. The discipline was very harsh, but I learned to love it. I would leave Lakeside High and go to the closest library, quickly get my homework done, and then I would spend probably from about 5 to 9 or 9:30 p.m. at the Taekwondo school, Monday through Friday. There

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came a point where I had to stop taking a couple days a week to take odd jobs to pay for the Taekwondo classes. I did that for the rest of high school and into college. Eventually, I taught at GSU as a 1st and 2nd degree black belt. After graduating from GSU, I tested for and received my 3rd degree black belt. I stuck with Taekwondo training long enough to receive a 4th degree black belt around 2001.

As a parent, I'm always seeking to have my child focused around educational role models. What is your education background?

I graduated from Lakeside High in Tucker in 1995. In 1996 I started at Georgia State University, originally a biology/pre-med major. I hated chemistry, and it was an understood chemistry minor, so I decided to change my major to something that was more applicable to my interests. The most closely related medical degree that was offered was exercise science and kinesiology. I completed that degree in 2000 and did a dual internship in corporate fitness and at a Taekwondo school in Tucker, Ko's Taekwondo. After graduating in June, I was sitting in an executive MBA class at Troy State University. I finished that in 2002. I also have a master's of Internet technology from University of Georgia, from which I graduated in 2007.

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Interviewer Sheila Elwin, husband Paul Jasionowski, and son Micah all enjoy studying with Master Taylor.



Saturday classes practice the same Taekwondo disciplines of sparring, forms, and techniques, but in a condensed fashion.

Any particular school honors? Future plans?

The executive master's program I was in at Troy State was their most prestigious program at the time, and because of my managerial background, I qualified for it. When I graduated there was an exit exam graded by Harvard, which I made the highest marks on. One of my dreams is to pursue a PhD in business with a concentration in management information systems. Schools I'm currently gathering information on are Emory, UGA, and Georgia Tech.

Do you have any other hobbies or interests outside of Taekwondo?

I like music of all kinds, but I played classical guitar and classical flute for several years. I've also had training in Flamenco guitar. In addition to this, I was a competitive Latin dancer, and studied Latin dancing for about three years. Being well-rounded in other areas helps Taekwondo by opening your ability to relate to a vast array of people.

How do you encourage your students in their own personal and educational growth?

Right now we've just finished a tour of the High Museum of Art to see the Terracotta warriors. I would like

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Master Taylor structures his teaching style to reach the individual student.



Wallace T. F. Taylor began studying Taekwondo while a student at Lakeside High.

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to see more educational outings like this, for example the King Tut display. I'm also hoping to get them involved in volunteer opportunities like Habitat for Humanity, the Latin American Association, and the Breast Cancer Walk. This can easily be tied in to the Taekwondo experience. I'm a firm believer in the five tenets of Taekwondo: courtesy, integrity, perseverance, self-control, and indomitable spirit. I think that volunteering builds character, and the awareness it provides builds spiritual strength.

Your school competed in a tournament recently. How did they do?

We started training for our first tournament in December 2008, and to my knowledge, Tucker has never been to an open martial arts tournament before. This one, held February 21 in Atlanta, was an open tournament that included Taekwondo and Tang Soo Do. For Taekwondo, they do Olympic sparring with Olympic rules – which is what I teach. I took a total of 21 participants, ranging in age from 6 to 19. I was expecting maybe four gold medals, maybe six silvers. The result far surpassed my expectations: we had 15 gold medals and 14 silvers. This is extremely unusual for a first-time competing school. In addition to that, our school

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got the Best of School Award, one of only seven awarded among the 50 schools and more than 400 competitors coming from seven states. I was so pleased with the results of the student participants. They were very committed to training, and that commitment was displayed in the results of the tournament.

Taekwondo is practiced in 120 countries, and by approximately 20 million people. I'm grateful to Grandmaster Min Suk Song for planning an inclusive tournament that exposed all the participants to how popular Taekwondo is. We hope to benefit from his expertise in the future. Additionally, Mr. Paul Jenious, the director of the Tucker Recreation Center, gave his full support to the tournament endeavor, as well as the Taekwondo program here, and without that, none of this would have been possible.

Did you do anything special to celebrate?

I decided to reward them with an international potluck. I thought this would be a really great opportunity to not just celebrate the event, but to expose them to the level of diversity that exists in the school. We had foods from 12 different countries, accompanied by Irish and Latin music. At least 50 people were in attendance, and families were encouraged to come with their children. This

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potluck shows me how willing people are to get into this program and be a part of it. People from all over the world are participating. It's beautiful; it's wonderful.

Do you have a vision for the future of the Tucker Taekwondo program?

I would like to see the best practices in the areas of exercise science, traditional martial arts, technology, and business leveraged for the maximization of potential for the students that come through these doors. I would like to use more contemporary knowledge in exercise science and physiology with the traditional approach to produce a superior Taekwondo. We would use the same forms, but our approach, our methodology, would be different.

I want to have a class for special needs Taekwondo in the future. I've taught kids with autism, physical impediments, and ADHD. It's rewarding to see their excitement. I would also like to see a "softer" Taekwondo that could be used to help degenerative diseases affiliated with the senior population. Additionally, a female-only self defense class would be a welcome addition.

Finally, Master Taylor, what does it mean to teach Taekwondo – for you and your students?

You become more than a Taekwondo teacher; you become a counselor. I get to use everything that I've

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learned...technology, health, exercise. It completely utilizes everything that I've spent the last 10 years studying academically. I've dealt with so many health conditions; I've seen how Taekwondo impacts people physically, how it affects people dealing with emotional issues. The result is usually the same. They take something from each class that they can use and that

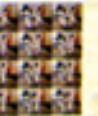
[Note: Master Taylor will be conducting a free self-defense class for women on Tuesday, May 12, at 7 p.m. at the Tucker Recreation Center. Sponsored by Mothers & More - DeKalb, the event will be open to the public. Call 404-292-1580 or email mamdekalb@yahoo.com to RSVP.]

helps them. As a teacher you are the medium; you have to find a way to teach each student. People with different personalities come here with different desires and expectations. Every person is a universe; no perspective is the same. You have to tailor your instruction methodology. That's the bottom line. As an instructor you have to sculpt, find out which learning style. You have to find out how to get each person from where they are to where they want to be, using the medium of Taekwondo.

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Tucker Tae KwonDo Center



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Paul Jenious, director of Tucker Recreation Center, was asked to share his thoughts on the Taekwondo program:

"I'm overjoyed and elated with the Taekwondo program. It has elevated the self-esteem and teamwork at Tucker Recreation Center. It has also increased the diversity of the children here. We are looking forward to more tournaments and children entering our program, and this is thanks to the efforts of Master Taylor. His professionalism and his expertise have certainly rubbed off on the children, and his efforts with special needs kids have really changed the lives of these young ladies and gentlemen."

To learn more about the Taekwondo program at Tucker Recreation Center, call 770-270-6226 or email MasterTaylor.TKD@gmail.com.