

# Passing the Torch

## Four Generations of American Martial Artists

By Norman McLinden

Since post WWII, martial arts have thoroughly and successfully integrated into American culture. Most action movies are packed with martial arts choreography and it is now common to see dojangs and dojos in every little town across the United States. Being a martial artist has become part of mainstream America.

Today there is great diversity in those who practice martial arts: male, female; young, old; physically fit, those wanting to get fit. And there is a growing trend of family members training together; I'm talking about parents and children together in the training hall. Martial arts may involve even more extended family members. With that thought, I'd like to share my story of four generations of American martial artists.



Caption Here!

### The Greatest Generation

*"I had come to understand what this generation of Americans meant to history. It is, I believe, the greatest generation any society has ever produced."*

**Tom Brokaw,**  
Journalist and Author

In 1944, my father, Norman McLinden Sr., lied about his age and joined the Navy. WWII was raging and the young man wanted to do his part. He became a Seaman First Class.

Sports were strongly advocated during the war since athletics were used to boost morale. My father was soon a member of his division's boxing club. Boxing matches in the military were frequent. One barely had enough time to heal from the last match before another one was held.

My father's thirty-odd boxing matches took him from Maryland to the South Pacific, and he eventually won the title All-Navy Champ Middleweight Division. His love of boxing, this American martial art, remains strong to this day. When he stepped into that ring 63 years ago he started a family tradition that has spanned seven decades.

After his discharge he fought professionally in the Rhode Island area. He retired from boxing shortly after that and settled down to raise a family. A new era and a new generation were coming along.

### The Boomers

According to national statistics, somewhere between a third and a quarter of all people living in America today were born between 1946 and 1965. I joined this generation in 1951.

In 1950s America, Rocky Marciano was the Heavyweight Champ of the world. Our little television sets brought us the Friday night fights and watching

wrestling on Saturday afternoons was a family activity. One of my earliest memories was boxing with my father. We each had a pair of beat-up, brown leather gloves. He would coach me with "three-jabs-cross, three-jabs-cross." This simple spoken cadence became as familiar to me as my ABCs. I was three-years-old when my father started me on a course I would follow my whole life.

Thirteen years later I took my first martial arts class. I drifted through the world of the late 1960s and early 1970s American martial arts. We had our heroes in those days. Everyone wanted to kick like Superfoot and be as tough as Joe Lewis. Bruce Lee was exploding at the movie box office. It was even possible to find a martial arts school within a 50-mile radius of your home.

My initial training was full-contact Karate, which soon evolved into kickboxing. My father's boxing lessons served me well in that arena. Only now, the drills were "three-jabs-cross, kick and kick." It was all very familiar territory and I adapted well.

After a time, I longed for more than just the fighting aspects of martial arts. I've read that we Baby Boomers have the core values of experimentalism and continuous learning. I sought new learning and became involved in the martial art that was consuming the United States, Tae Kwon Do.

In this art, I not only found the physical challenges I needed, I found a value system. The values were modesty, perseverance, self-control and indomi-

**"The generations of men run on in the tide of time, but leave their destined lineaments permanent for ever & ever,"**

William Blake, Poet

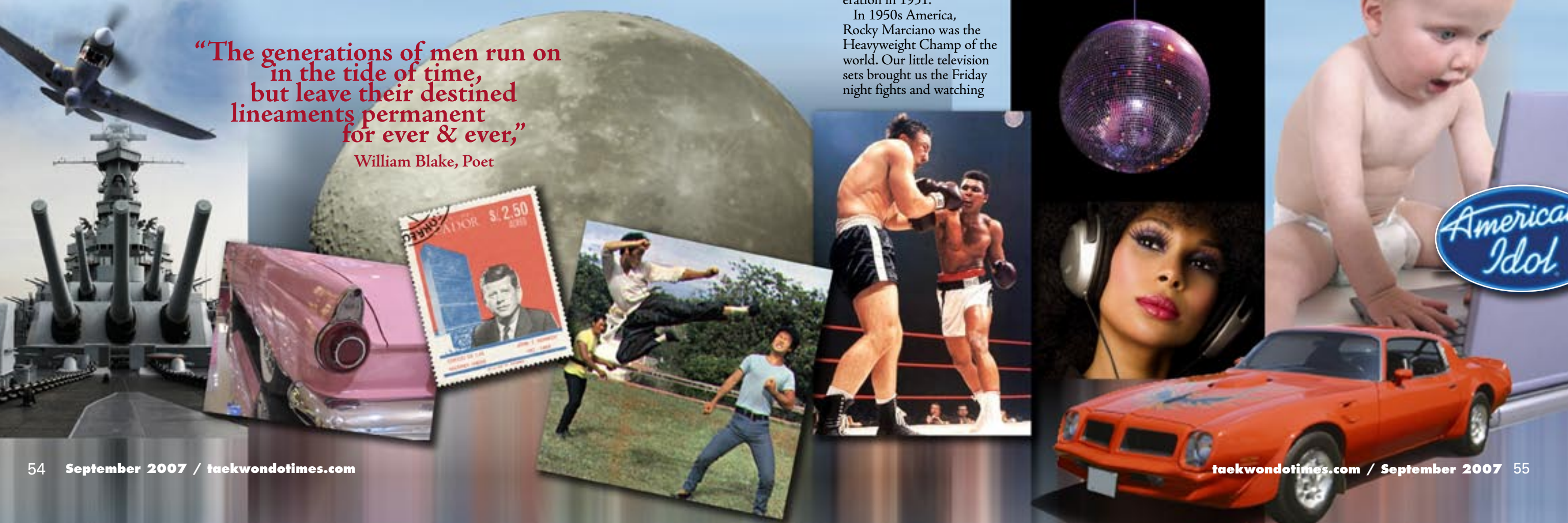


table spirit. I had found a path in life to follow, or, as we say, "found a way of life."

Studying Tae Kwon Do became my passion. I dedicated myself to this system and I became a black belt, and soon, a black belt instructor. Eventually I would open my own schools.

## Generation X

Gloria Gaynor was singing, "I Will Survive," The Clash blared out, "London Calling," and disco was born and met its timely death in this era. Muscle cars ruled and the car to own was a Pontiac Trans Am. Mohammed Ali was the world champ for a third time and Bo Derek was a "10." This was the seventies, the age of Generation X.

The young boy in the back of the dojang took to Tae Kwon Do like a duck to water. He is intense; he even smiles as I deliver the grueling basic drills. He is my son, Keith McLinden. He was seven-years-old when he started his formal training. The year was 1979.

We had played around with punching, kicking and doing Chun Gi form at home. He was quick to catch on. It wasn't hard to tell he found a love that would last forever.

The 1980s were a challenging time for America. We had a hostage crisis in Iran and an energy shortage that resulted in endless lines at every gas station. It was also a demanding time for our children. This generation, like mine, needed to find a true set of values.

Keith's Tae Kwon Do training helped him find those values. He became a very goal-orientated teenager. Generation X is noted for accepting challenge and taking risks. Keith's next activity was proof to his generational traits. He took up kickboxing.

I was honored when he invited me to work his corner. The smell and feel of the ring was as natural as a Wednesday night supper cooking on the stove. His proud grandfather watched from his ringside seat. Keith won his bout that particular evening and was ranked ninth in the New England Welterweight Division.

After Keith's ring career, he continued to train and eventually teach Tae Kwon Do. When I opened my own academy in 1993, he became an instructor. To my great amusement he taught one of the most dysfunctional groups of children I have ever seen in a class.

But he kept their attention and won their hearts and minds. To me, this was a bigger

victory than any of his kickboxing bouts.

A father is always concerned with the influence he has on his son. But my concerns subsided when Keith made this simple statement to me, "Every success I've had in life, I attribute to Tae Kwon Do and my martial arts training."

He is now a high school history teacher and his passion for martial arts remains. He is one of the main instructors at my school and is a proud fourth-dan black belt. Today he is busy raising his own family: our fourth generation.

## The "Net" Generation

Welcome to the age of iPods, cell phones and Hip Hop. SpongeBob SquarePants is a household name. You can be an "American Idol" or "Dance with the Stars." It seems that anyone can be a star on reality TV. This is the world of the "Net Generation," my granddaughter's generation.



Caption Here!

Hana, as we Tae Kwon Do stylists know, means number one. In Japanese it means beautiful. Hana is my beautiful, number one granddaughter. Yes, Grandpa (or Boompa as I am known) bought her an infant's Karate uniform when she was born. Yes, we took her picture in it. And yes, my secret longing was that she would actually train in Tae Kwon Do someday.

Hana has been playing in the dojang ever since she could walk. She would bounce from mat to mat, and then scurry across the floor on the balls of her feet. Finally at age seven, like her dad, she started taking regular classes. Of course, Hana is doing this whenever her schedule permits. These new millennium children have a lot more activities than my boomer generation ever did. So, somewhere between skiing lessons and soccer, Hana has time to train.

I recall standing in awe the first time I entered a martial arts school. That is not the case with this generation. Martial arts are as common to these kids as computers. Hana can manipulate a mouse just as easy as

**Four Generations punching. Keith, Norman, Mac, and Hana.**

delivering a front snap kick. It makes you wonder if the "Net Generation" will take their training seriously. Will Tae Kwon Do be a lasting part of their lives?

I can only say that lately I've noticed some interesting developments in my granddaughter. The last time I observed her in class she had that certain look of intensity. It is that look of someone cautiously, but surely, being swallowed up in the martial arts.

I asked Hana what was so special about Tae Kwon Do. She replied, "It is wonderful; it protects the weak and makes them strong." Wow, that's a pretty good insight from one of those "net gen" kids. This truly will be a "great" generation to teach.

These kids also seem to have wonderful support from their parents. For many years, I had a lot of "drop off" and "pick up" parents. This was fine, I was pleased that parents entrusted our academy and instructors to do a good job. However, I have observed that "Net Generation" parents are not a passive group. When they inquire about classes they have a fine set of questions. Will this help my children in school? Will they know not to hit their little brother? I now have a strategy for getting these parents very involved in their children's training.

When parents come seeking lessons for their children I always ask, "What about you?" Often, I share my story of four generations with them. I also invite them to watch one of our classes.

Many parents are surprised at what they see. Across the dojang floor, my school has every possible combination of fathers and mothers, daughters and sons training together. These students are building a family tradition.

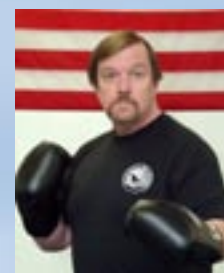
## An American Way of Life

On this particular day, I have just finished teaching my class. I am in my office trying to straighten out a few business matters and my son will start his class in a few minutes. I look to the back of the dojang and see my father has just finished his heavy bag workout. He is 79-years-old.

I hear him coaching his favorite training partner, his great granddaughter. He is saying to Hana the same words I heard from all those years ago, "three-jabs-cross, three-jabs-cross." A wide, sentimental smile passes across my face.

Similar scenes of intergenerational training are being played out all across the United States. We have incorporated not just the technical aspects of the martial arts; we have embraced a value system that can be passed on from father to son, from mother to daughter.

From generation to generation, martial arts are an American way of life. ●



**About the Author:** Norman McLinden is a freelance writer and Owner/Master Instructor of Northeastern Tae Kwon Do Academy located in Bellingham, Massachusetts. He is a seventh-dan black belt in Tae Kwon Do, a fifth-dan in the Joe Lewis Fighting System and the State Representative of the I.C.H.F. (International Combat Hapkido Federation). He can be reached at nmclinden@msn.com



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