

# Tae-‘Kim’-Do

Senior Heather Kim and her sister, junior Julie Kim, recall their experiences with tae-kwon-do.

Story by: Ankit Kadakia

The room is dead silent and tension is in the air. From out of nowhere, a punch lashes out. Then, a couple of powerful kicks rip through the air. Finally, a loud “ki-hup!” is heard and the match has ended. Senior Heather Kim and her sister, junior Julie Kim, face this experience multiple times a week. Heather and Julie have been participating in tae-kwon-do for the past six years. After years of working hard and dedicating their time to the sport, both sisters said they have become first-degree black belts.

Julie said she first got interested in tae-kwon-do because her dad took her to see her tae-kwon-do master’s school. She said that she and her sister are first generation Korean Americans and their Korean roots were the most influential reason why she and her sister got involved in tae-kwon-do.

“Plus we’re Korean,” Heather said. “Doing tae-kwon-

do is kind of a stereotypical thing. Our parents were born in Korea. To be honest, tae-kwon-do made me feel even more Korean.”

Julie and Heather practice at a local tae-kwon-do center. Heather said they spend about one to two hours after school every day practicing and teaching the sport to younger children.

Heather said that teaching kids is one of the most difficult aspects of tae-kwon-do. She said it can get very frustrating at times.

“You have to remember that they are little kids,” Heather said. “Sometimes they can’t fully bend their knees or they can’t make their arm go that high or kick that high. You have to remember their limitations, but you still have to push them at the same time because their parents want to see them succeed. We have to be patient with the kids.”

Heather said she and Julie are trained by tae-kwon-do master, Pok Sun Yang, who is an eighth-degree black belt. Julie said that ninth-degree black belt is the highest level and only a few people in the world have one.

“[Yang] pushes us for sure and he’s really dedicated in what we do,” Julie said. “He has a way of knowing our ability and potential because he has taught us for so long.”

Julie said she believes that tae-kwon-do has greatly impacted their lives because they are more involved. She said it helped her speak out and made her a better leader because she teaches. Heather said it made her more humble in how she portrays herself.

“There is a lot of self-discipline involved in tae-kwon-do,” Heather said. “You have to know your body’s physical and mental limits. We don’t like showing off and everything. Our master says that we are representing his school. We have to be humble, but we also have to know that we are strong. We are confident in what we do.”

Julie and Heather both agree that they have faced many challenges with gender stereotypes. Heather said that they have been put down many times just because they are girls.

“Not a lot of teenage girls do tae-kwon-do,” Heather said. “The gender thing is a tough challenge for us to face because we are girls and physically, we aren’t as strong as guys – like in academics. This makes me mad, but it also motivates me to work harder. There are people who think my potential is not up there because I’m a girl. They say, ‘your master Yang gave you that black belt.’ I worked five years for it and I know what I can do, so don’t mess with me.”

Julie said her parents significantly support their involvement in tae-kwon-do. She said it was something they wanted to do and their parents never had to push them.

“My dad likes to brag about us doing tae-kwon-do because we are so strong,” Heather said. “My mom is also really proud of us. They always want us to aim for first place. They are proud of us as long as we try our best. Anytime we ask to go to a tournament or do an event, they just say yes. They are always there anytime we need their support.”

Julie and Heather’s dad, Kumkyu Kim, said he thinks it is really great how his daughters have been involved in tae-kwon-do for so long.

“They really love it,” Kumkyu said. “They learn so much. It will help them a lot, especially because they are teaching younger kids defense techniques.”

Parents are not the only family support Julie and Heather have. Julie said the largest form of support they get is from each other.

“Being sisters working at the same thing is so fun,” Julie said. “I love it. We keep pushing each other until we are the best we can be. It’s so comfortable to work with my sister through this because we do a lot of things together – tae-kwon-do especially because we spend so many hours in it. We get to have a better relationship through it.”



Warming up for her performance at the Korean Folk Festival on Sept. 29, junior Julie Kim practices her routine. Kim performed as part of the United Tae-kwon-do Centers (UTC) Tigers performance groups (photo by Michaela O'Connor).