

FULLERTON STORIES

There is None This Chuck Won't Do

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Story by **Elaine Murphy/FullertonStories.com** --

It is test day, and Chuck Geitner is anxious and impatient, but also excited, having calmed his nerves a bit by meditating that morning. Sitting in a line with the 22 black belt candidates, he looks composed and concentrated.

Chuck Geitner has always been a man of varied pursuits: in his 85 years, he's been an Army sergeant, a high school football coach, a history and political science teacher, a poet, and a multisport athlete. Now, proving he is never done learning, he's mastered a new form of art and sport by earning his black belt in karate as the oldest student at the American Martial Arts Academy.

Spurred by the distant yet vivid memory of an elderly neighbor from his childhood who spent his days sitting in an armchair, Geitner vowed never to live an idle lifestyle. The eighth child in his family and an infant during the Great Depression, Geitner grew up in Illinois and became a high school teacher after serving in the Korean War. He moved to Fullerton in 2010 to be near his son, a professor at Chapman University, and immediately involved himself in the community. While volunteering at an event at the Muckenthaler, he came across a display set up by the American Martial Arts Academy, where he learned karate could help him strengthen his injured ankle and improve his limited mobility.

It took him four years – the average time progression for karate students – to move up the ranks from white belt to the Red Belt Academy, a group of elite brown belt students chosen for their prowess in karate and potential to achieve the rank of black belt. At first, he needed three spotters to protect him from falling and further injuring his bad ankle. Now, though, he has developed enough balance and strength – and more than enough will and fortitude – to perform alone.

As he prepares to test for his black belt, the ultimate symbol of strength and discipline, Geitner reflects on what karate has taught him and what keeps him coming back, saying, “Karate helps me in as many ways as you can think of.” He sees the tenets of his teaching and military background reflected in karate’s teaching principles (care, believe, challenge, reward and praise) and values (leadership, knowledge, perseverance, respect, teamwork and self-defense), and believes all people can reach their maximum potential through these attitudes.

With these principles, you can’t lose, he says.

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Karate also encourages him to express himself and to ground himself through meditation and discipline. A lover of poetry, Geitner incorporates his own poems into his karate practice by reading his written pieces – many of which are about his girlfriend – at freestyle karate performances. To relieve his mind of preoccupations and focus on improving his practice, he meditates on a time when he was particularly confident: as a 21-year-old supply sergeant in the Army, he served in the Korean War from 1951 to 1952, believing his squadron was invincible as enemy artillery fired behind them from the Sea of Japan.

At the most fundamental level, though, Geitner loves karate because he enjoys staying active and taking on challenges. With his improved but still somewhat limited mobility and his bad ankle, karate isn't always easy for Geitner. He admits to being "a little stubborn" and a perfectionist, but these traits power his determination to succeed at the sport and to overcome his limitations.

"I admire anybody who can conquer obstacles and come from a tough situation and succeed," he says, naming Jackie Robinson as a childhood hero and an example of pushing past barriers to success. "Things don't come easily, only as hard work, persistence and dedication."

Through karate, he has improved his power, focus, patience, strength and agility in difficult moves with weapons such as nunchucks or the bow. He has had to let go of his ego a bit to be taught by younger instructors, but now diligently takes notes in class and is an excellent ambassador for karate, communicating the sport's teachings to others. He takes pride in helping younger students master the moves and enjoys receiving encouragement and handmade tokens from them, as the children at the studio remind him of his own grown son and daughter.

Perhaps most of all, he remains optimistic of his potential and skills in karate, as well as his ability to be a role model. For all of the encouragement and help he receives, he also inspires others – there are only eight students over age 16 at the studio, some of whom are around his age and started practicing karate because of his example.

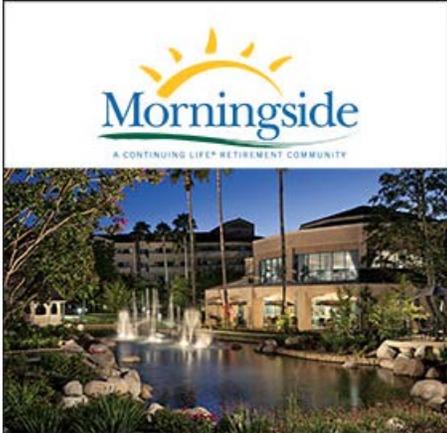
"He came in here with his cup half full looking for help. He handles loss well – karate has helped him be more gracious," says the studio's Shihan Brad Wenneberg, emphasizing how well-respected and well-liked Geitner is around the studio. "It's not about kicks, strikes and punches, it's about personal development. He's unstoppable. He lives his life with grace, dignity and teachability – a lesson to us all."

On test day, the judges, mostly black belt students at the academy, critique students on humility, understanding of the style, and maturity of technique; students must know enough about the moves and the history of karate to teach others, something Geitner does regularly. One judge advises students not to sacrifice technique for speed, emphasizing the need to remain focused and meditative so as not to get distracted by their surroundings.

Geitner performs moves with confidence, including complex katas – a series of fluid, choreographed movements that combine strikes and kicks with purpose – which are met with loud applause and cheers from the crowd of friends and family. Each red belt must demonstrate specific expertise in a weapon of their choice and its history; Geitner chooses nunchucks – originally used as a farming tool in Okinawa, Japan – because, as he explains to the audience, they feel most comfortable in his hands, are less violent than other weapons, and best enable him to defend himself.

Geitner was awarded an interim black belt – a black belt with a white stripe running through it – and the rank of Shodan-Ho. The full rank of Shodan, the lowest rank of black belt, is awarded upon further training and fulfilling new requirements as a black belt.

"It's not that my skills are so great, but that I do the very best I can do," says Geitner. "I want the kids and people my age to see that somebody my age can do this and achieve it."



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