

GETTING A KICK OUT OF TAEKWONDO

Megan Garretson not only has a black belt in taekwondo; she teaches it, too.

The Sheridan, WY Branch 1006 member fell in love with taekwondo during a college exchange program while she was at the University of Wyoming; she spent a month studying in South Korea, where she saw a demonstration of taekwondo. It inspired her.

“I wanted to be able to do what they were doing,” she said.

As luck would have it, that specific style of taekwondo, by the International Taekwon-Do Federation (ITF), was being taught near her home in Wyoming. The carrier started taking taekwondo classes in 2002 but took a break after starting a family, “when life got away from me” and she was unable to make it to the classes, she said.

But when her oldest child, Sam, began taking taekwondo classes about two and half years ago, “I sat on the sidelines for a few sessions, and then I couldn’t do it anymore,” Garretson said. She knew she wanted to step in to help train her son.

The class was taught by Senior Master Johnson, who has an eighth-degree black belt, second-highest in the sport. “I was going to keep coming whether he liked it or not,” the carrier said, but Johnson was glad for the assistance. When Johnson had surgery, she stepped in as the main instructor while he recuperated.

Garretson now trains at the local YMCA on Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays under Johnson, and teaches classes on Mondays and Wednesdays.

Last October, she earned a first-degree black belt. “Because I’m a black belt, I can train with other black belts on Sunday,” she added.

There are nine degrees of black belt in taekwondo, with the highest

denoting the pinnacle of a lifetime dedication to the sport. Garretson says that while there are about 11,000 first-degree black belt holders in the United States under the ITF system, there are only 12 ninth-degree holders, including both men and women.

Garretson appreciates the fact that taekwondo encompasses a variety of philosophical elements. “Because there is a mind, spirit and body relationship, it’s not just being athletic,” she says. “It’s not just about beating up anybody. We have tenets that we live by.”

The five tenets of taekwondo are courtesy, integrity, perseverance, self-control and indomitable spirit (which Garretson says includes having “the courage to do what’s right”).

While black belts take an average of five and a half to six years to achieve, “I had a life pause in there—it took me a bit longer,” Garretson said. “I felt like I needed to start over.”

The carrier teaches 6- to 10-year-olds. “I like the challenge,” she said. “It tests my patience every night, but it makes me better. Going back to the basics does help.”

She also feels good about providing her pupils with life skills. “I think it’s important that kids learn self-defense,” the carrier said. “I hope they’ll never have to use it, but it helps to be prepared.”

Garretson also is aware of her status as a role model. “As an instructor, you have a lot of influence inside and outside the gym,” she says.

They concentrate on focus and discipline, as well as the five tenets, and address people in authority with respect: “Yes, ma’am; Yes, sir.”

Garretson tells her students, “Treat others how you want to be treated. If you have to throw someone over your shoulder, you want to do it in the nicest way possible.”



Garretson at a 2018 tournament

The carrier says she feels that she is constantly learning new skills, especially from teaching. "I learn two new things every night," she said, including visualizing how she is going to say things to her class.

For taekwondo participants to progress to the next level for most of the lower-colored belts, they must test in front of a

panel of judges to show that their skills have advanced. "You test every three months [if you're ready]," Garretson says, adding, "We never ask to test; we are told when we test."

To move from one black belt degree to the next, you must wait 18 months

for testing between the first and second degree black belt, and then 24 months for each degree following that.

In addition to the physical test, black-belt applicants "have to do community service to be eligible" to get to the next level, Garretson said. They are encouraged to do something outside of their comfort zone. She volunteers with the Stamp Out Hunger food drive each year, but that doesn't count for her, since it's part of her regular routine. She says that donating blood or volunteering with Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts or Meals on Wheels are all examples of good vehicles of volunteerism.

Her "minis," aged 10 and younger, test for their next stripe or belt during class. And while her taekwondo club does host some testing at its home dojo (a room or hall where martial arts are

practiced), much of the other testing, training and tournaments take place outside of Sheridan, in other parts of Wyoming or in the neighboring states of Colorado and Nebraska.

Garretson says she doesn't get a lot of nerves when she tests for a belt herself. "It's a thrill," she said, but "having someone you've trained test is more nerve-racking. It's a reflection on you." She had eight of her students test while Johnson was out recuperating; all passed to their next rank.

She keeps busy with

the Postal Service, too. The carrier currently serves as Branch 1006 vice president and treasurer, as well as state secretary-treasurer. She's spent 12 years with USPS—three as a clerk and the past nine as a letter carrier.

Garretson has been lucky not to have suffered any major injuries and says she fortunately has never had to go to work with a black eye. Still, co-workers tease her over her pastime, as does her postmaster.

Branch President **Gerald Curtis** said with a laugh, "I try not to upset her."

Garretson's passion for taking and teaching taekwondo classes doesn't seem likely to fade anytime soon. "I have tons of fun. I'm going to keep doing it," she says.

Plus, she jokes, "It gets some frustration out after work." **PR**

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The carrier with Senior Master Johnson after successfully testing for her first-degree black belt last fall

Garretson with her son, Sam

