

HEART OF A FIGHTER

Van Pelt finds recovery from bypass surgery in the art of Tae Kwon Do

BY COURTNEY GAILLARD
THE CHRONICLE

Dave Van Pelt was the kind of kid who was usually the last player picked for a team during gym class. He never considered himself to be the athletic type growing up. Earning a black belt was the last thing this 59-year-old ever thought he would accomplish at any age.

But he did. Van Pelt, who is an Internet salesman for Modern Toyota, was one of four people over the age of 50 to pass the five-hour martial arts test at United Tae Kwon Do Academy earlier this month.

"I was amazed that I felt as good as I did afterwards," said Van Pelt, who more than 10 years ago found himself recuperating from heart bypass surgery. He came home from work complaining of what he thought was a toothache. Van Pelt's wife rushed him to the hospital, where doctors discovered after a series of tests that he had "the widow maker" — a term used to describe the blockage of the left artery leading to his heart, which which can lead to sudden death if not caught in time.

"(The cardiologist) told me I had about a week to live. He told me I had a choice to make between the surgery or not," said Van Pelt. "I had (the surgery). I quit smoking, lost some weight and tried walking. And then little by little I started backsliding. I wasn't walking as much. I was eating more and more."

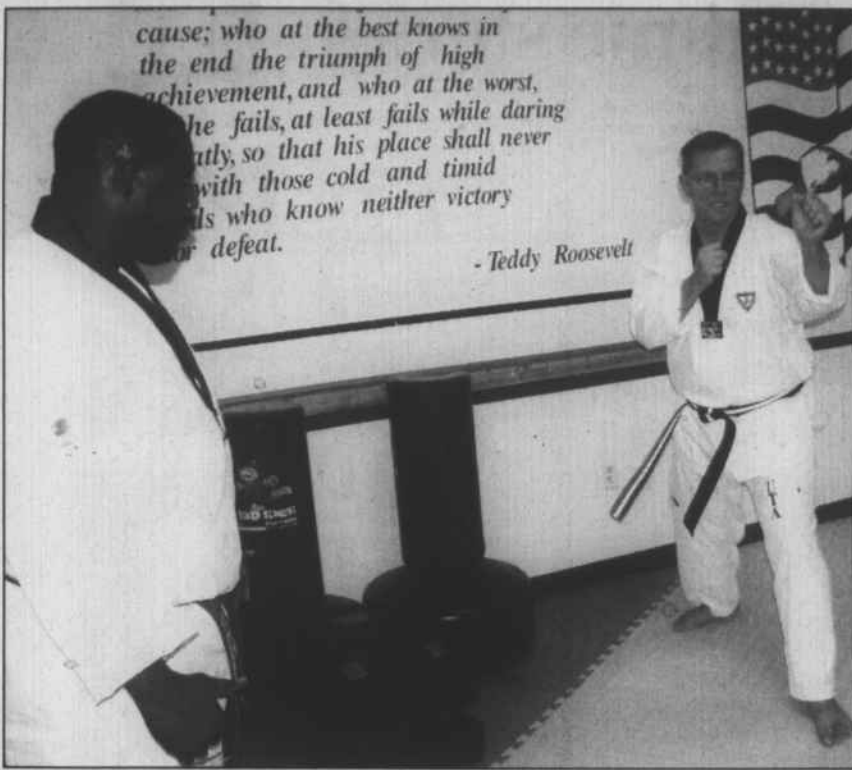
Just two years ago, doctors were once again urging Van Pelt to make a decision again: Improve your health or risk going under the knife again. Even though he had reverted to some of his old habits, Van Pelt says, he was not interested in going through surgery a second time. His golf instructor suggested he consider taking up Tae Kwon Do.

"I looked at her and thought, 'You are really crazy,'" Van Pelt said. "I called Master (Barry) Partridge and made an appointment and never showed up."

It took some convincing by owner and master instructor Barry Partridge to get Van Pelt to come to United Take Kwon Do Academy. When Van Pelt finally showed up to the facility on Jonestown Road, he says, he had to overcome his defeatist attitude about mastering martial arts. Another month passed before Van Pelt started attending classes regularly.

Partridge says there was no stopping Van Pelt once he began to realize his potential. Van Pelt's flexibility, strength and not to mention his confidence have all improved since he began practicing martial arts, says Partridge. Now Van Pelt is training other students on the floor. Partridge says that Van Pelt is proof that age is nothing but a number because he is the oldest person to earn a black belt at the academy.

"When Dave first came here I knew that we could help



Dave Van Pelt assumes a fighting stance as Barry Partridge looks on.

Photo by Courtney Gaillard

him, but I knew we had to take it slow because of his condition," said Partridge. "Now he can keep up with anyone of any age...I know this saved his life."

Partridge says it is rare to see that many people over 50 testing for their black belt. But he says most of his adult students like Van Pelt can keep up with the youngsters in any Tae Kwon Do class. He says many of his adult students are parents whose children are members of the academy.

"We test (for black belts) twice a year. It's uncommon — we've rarely had that many in that (over-50) age group test at the same time. I think people are starting to realize that Tae Kwon Do has more to offer," said Partridge. "(Van Pelt) is more fit than people who are 40 years old."

What a difference two years makes. A week before Van Pelt earned his black belt, he shocked doctors by passing his cardiac physical and treadmill test with flying colors. He has since been taken off blood pressure medicine because he's in such good health.

"Had (he not started Tae Kwon Do) I would have had another surgery. The life expectancy on a bypass (patient) is 10-13 years. (My doctor) said, 'You're beating the odds,'" Van Pelt said.

It was not too long ago, says Van Pelt, that he needed his wife to help him off his knees after doing yard work. But as his 60th birthday approaches, Van Pelt says he wants other people his age and older to aspire for physical fitness no matter how old they are. He'd like to teach a Tae Kwon Do class to adults sometime in the near future. Even his grandsons are planning to take Tae Kwon Do classes soon.

"I've met a lot of folks my age who were barely walking

and hunched over." You don't have to sit and be a couch

potato. You don't have to be miserable."

Renee Andrews named top library employee for 2004

She has worked at the library for 25 years

SPECIAL TO THE CHRONICLE

Renee Andrews has been named recipient of the Forsyth County Public Library's Ann R. Gehlen award in recognition of being named the 2004 Library Employee of the Year.

Andrews began her career in the Children's Room at Central Library in 1980, working as a storyteller and helping plan children's programming. Today, as a member of the library's children's outreach staff, she conducts story times and programming in the community for small children and teenagers without convenient access to library services, oftentimes providing trans-

portation herself for kids with no other way to attend a library program.

She is a member of the N.C. Black Storytellers Association as well as other organizations devoted to preserving and enhancing the art of storytelling.



Renee Andrews

Andrews was also a key leader in the organization of early Kwanzaa celebrations in Winston-Salem and

continues to represent the library in Kwanzaa events today. She has also been active in the library's Lanterns of Hope celebration, held each summer, as well as being an ongoing volunteer for the biannual National Black Theatre Festival.

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Alzheimer's Disease Strikes Another American Family

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