

1970s, and he says he loves it still. But his love of the martial arts pre-dates his entry into the military by almost a decade – he began studying in Thailand when he was 10 – and when he hit his mid-40s he realized that if he was going to open his own school, he had to do it soon.

“I wasn’t sure that five years from now I’d have the energy to start anew,” says Odom who, at 5’6” and 160 pounds is still in superb physical condition. “If I can’t physically demonstrate things – if I can’t walk the talk – then I’m not going to be very credible, especially as a start-up school.”

He decided to make the leap from military to civilian life, and in April of 2004 he opened the studio in Ghent. From the start, the school attracted a wide range of students – five kids and five adults, including a 65-year-old man, were among the first to enroll.

Within a year, he had 100 students. The need for more space, combined with the fact that an adjacent business wanted to expand into his Ghent location, led him on a search for a new site, and eventually he came upon the 45th Street building. It had a leaky roof, a leaky foundation, drainage problems, no bathrooms, no air conditioning, no heating, inadequate electrical service, inadequate parking, and a host of other flaws. But it also had the one essential feature: a large open space, unencumbered by support posts.

Odom decided to go for it and took ownership last June.

“The first classes were reminiscent of the days in Thailand,” he recalls, “with very thin mats on top of concrete, no A/C in mid-summer, and concrete and drywall dust everywhere.

“But we made it.”

Indeed he did. By mid-fall, the 6,000-square-foot space was dry, freshly painted, climate-controlled and featured new mats and heavy bags, changing rooms, restrooms, an office, and waiting and reception areas.

IT WAS IN THIS environment that I stood for my first lesson in the Korean martial art form known as tang soo do.

In Japan, where karate developed as a descendant of the Chinese martial art of kung fu, the hall in which martial arts are practiced is called a *dojo*. In Korea, it’s a *dojang*. Regardless of the name, it is not a place to be entered into lightly. In all martial arts traditions, it is “The Place of Awakening” – an indication of the close relationship between the martial arts and Zen Buddhism.

“A dojo is a miniature cosmos where we make contact with ourselves – our fears, anxieties, reactions and habits,” writes Joe Hyams in his classic book *Zen and the Martial Arts*. “It is an arena of confined conflict where we confront an opponent who is not [really] an opponent but rather a partner engaged in helping us understand our-

selves more fully. It is a place where we can learn a great deal in a short time about who we are and how we react in the world. The conflicts that take place inside the dojo help us handle conflicts that take place outside. The total concentration and discipline required to study martial arts carries over into daily life.”

Such high-minded theories are of little interest to some martial arts students. They simply want to learn to fight. And ironically, getting caught up in ideas about what you’re doing is contrary to the spirit of Zen, which stresses, above all else, the importance of “no-mind” – of dwelling, utterly and completely, in the moment.

The ideas appeal to me, however, and I quickly learned that they also appeal to Odom. They appeal to him in part because of his nature and in part because of what he describes as a “cosmopolitan upbringing.”

Odom was born in 1957 in Jonesboro, Arkansas, but when he was three, his family moved to Thailand. His father, an Army officer, was a Southeast Asian expert and fluent in Thai. His mother was a “country girl who became gourmet cook.”

“I grew up in many respects as a minority,” he recalls. “I never felt any different, but it gave me some perspective on

things that the average American doesn’t get. I value that experience a lot and have tried to impart some of things I learned as a kid to my kids.” (Odom is married and has two sons.)

While living in Thailand, Odom remembers, he was isolated from mainstream American pastimes like basketball, football, and baseball.

“The other thing I didn’t have was much television,” he says. “I spent a whole lot of time as a young kid entertaining myself reading encyclopedias and comic books. And comic books were a major influence, I think. You grew up with the notion of the superhero”.

Odom says his favorite was

Daredevil “because he was the guy who really didn’t have any powers; he was doing it all because of his development.”

“When they started offering tae kwon do as an after-school program in 1968, I signed up. The classes were held on a concrete slab in a semi-open air shelter, two or three days a week.”

“Two o’clock to three o’clock in the afternoon in Thailand,” he remembers with a shake of his head. “You ain’t seen hot.” But Odom stuck with it, and two years later, he earned his black belt, first degree.

FROM WHERE I stood on Halloween, the prospect of getting my black belt seemed remote, to say the least. It occurred to me that Odom and I are close to the same age, but that my background is starkly different from his. Although I was born and raised in a borough of New York – one of the most diverse cities in the world – my neighborhood was largely homogenous – white, working class, Catholic – and I had all the diversions that Odom lacked. Moreover, while Odom was drawn to the military life, I spent a lot of time in my mid-teens dreading the prospect of going to

Vietnam. I remember floating the idea of becoming a conscientious objector, if it came to that, and being surprised when my parents shot down the idea as dishonest. I realized pretty quickly

Larry Carter (see profile) is the school’s highest-ranking student. He earned his 3rd degree black belt in December.

