THE NIGHT BLOOMING

A Journey of Teen Twin Champions Overcoming Racism, Rejection & Abuse, To Find Their Identity & Purpose In Life

by Sally and Jonah Ismael

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A Bit of History

For the past 2000 years, some form of martial arts always has been present in Korea. Today, this martial art form is known as Taekwondo. Taekwondo is a form of self-defense that uses flexible techniques performed with leg kicks. While Taekwondo is an ancient Korean martial art, in recent years it has developed into a modern international Olympic sport, known for its physical and mental discipline. Although Taekwondo is its own unique martial art form, it has been influenced by other forms such as Karate, Judo, and Kung Fu. Through physical and psychological exercise techniques, Taekwondo can strengthen values such as courtesy, loyalty, honesty, respect, trust, physical health, well-being, personal growth, and many more spiritual benefits — if taught the right way.

On April 11, 1955, modern Taekwondo was born. Since then, over 30 million people have practiced this sport in more than 156 countries. The ability to focus and concentrate are essential components of Taekwondo, but the physical essence of Taekwondo centers on kicking and punching. Kicking requires flexibility, speed, strength, and power. Through sparring, athletes need to demonstrate skillful kicking techniques in a very clever and situation-based manner. The journey to obtain a black belt takes years of practice and immense commitment, with athletes learning how to control every part of their bodies through the various forms they learn—forms developed through years of learning different types of kicks.

CHAPTER ONE Introduction (Sally)



Jonah at a local tournament preparing for his Forms competition, where he presented his Blue Belt Forms

At the beginning of Summer 2012, we started the first steps of our long journey toward earning black belts in martial arts. We both began developing our love for martial arts, especially Taekwondo, at a young age, having been inspired by many fighters around the world who participated in the sport. We had read many stories about ancient warriors who fought hard with respect and discipline to bring honor to their families. It was those values behind martial arts that attracted us to learn more about this sphere of the sport. We participated in

several different sports back then, but we didn't enjoy them. We played soccer, baseball, hockey, and gymnastics, (because those were the kinds of sports that most kids of our generation played), but we always felt as if we were missing something. Although we played on several teams and participated in many competitions, our involvement in these sports lacked purpose.

Teamwork was one of the common principles in these sports. We were supposed to learn many great things through playing sports, such as developing skills to communicate with our teammates, exchanging ideas, and building positive, supportive techniques as members of the team. However, we have always been struck by the fact that talking about principles in these sports is one thing, but demonstrating them on the field is another. Even when I (Sally) was involved in gymnastics, the unbalanced competition between team members was driving me away from the sport. In fact, we both were unable to find our identities or purpose while playing these other sports. We knew there was a more meaningful foundation behind these competitive sports apart from competing with others, or against others, but we couldn't find it. We thought we might be the problem. Our potential toward mastery in these kinds of sports just didn't reach the level we wanted because the rejection and manipulation by others made our passion fade away; it destroyed our desire to keep trying, and made our motivation to continue going forward dim.

We gradually began to withdraw from participation in these sports after realizing we were being rejected not because of our abilities, but because of our identity, and due to the racial, ethnic, and religious prejudices of others. Unfortunately, we couldn't change other people's opinions and perceptions of us, so we gave up trying to be the best in order to impress others.

We began to develop an interest in martial arts—not as a sport, but as a way to express our inner selves. We were eager to discover our identities and to find our passions. Regrettably, although we were young, racism had affected us early. It was not clearly visible, but we felt it through the looks of others and their behavior toward us. The most distressing emotion a child goes through is feeling rejected and unwelcome — not because of their personality or thoughts but because of something the child can't control. Sadly, we weren't able to recognize the motives behind this unreasonable rejection until later on.

Our elementary school years were our worst school years. We could not imagine that kids our age would have to experience this much negativity. Our peers were young like us—happy, playful, and full of energy. At the time, we couldn't understand why some kids weren't so nice to us, but were nice to others. Why did they bully us? Why didn't they want to play with us?

As we grew, the negative feelings toward us grew as well. Everything around us was unclear as we tried to understand what caused some of our peers to act the way they did toward us. We encountered the term "stereotype" early on. Other people's negative perceptions of us, our race, and our ethnicity were the beginning of an unpleasant campaign of continuous rejection. Born in the United States to Arab parents—both of whom were well educated and respected in Israel—who immigrated more than 25 years ago from Israel to pursue their dream, we were still rejected by our peers simply because of who we were.

The silent rejection that accompanied us throughout our elementary years was like a deadly cancer slowly spreading through our bodies; while our smiling faces tried to hide the terrible pain pressing down on our hearts. Having been introduced to negativity at a very young age, we were lonely and had low self-esteem. However, what saved us was the overall positivity that our mother nurtured inside us which served as a protective shield for our mental health.

We were blessed with a mother who was our shadow. She had a certain magic, a positive spirit, that allowed us to put away all the hurtful, angry, and sad feelings we had developed during the school day. She miraculously eliminated any negative emotions we were experiencing and boosted us up to remain the way we had to be. She encouraged us to believe in ourselves and to forgive. In fact, forgiveness was a panacea for us as it allowed us to repair our scars and make each day a fresh start—a fresh start to allow our peers to get to know us better. We tried hard to represent who we were. We wanted to stay on the right path—to forgive, heal our souls, and attract positive forces into our lives. Our mother was careful to remind us daily that forgiveness was the only remedy we needed to stay healthy.

Our love for martial arts increased day by day as we were inspired by the stories of people fighting for a purpose. We, too, felt that we had a purpose, but we

couldn't figure out what it was at the time. We were young and couldn't express ourselves in a way that would allow our parents to view martial arts as we saw it.

Our parents were like many other parents who were willing to do anything they could so that their children would excel at sports. Although they personally had no passion for playing or viewing sports, they went the extra mile to allow us to join many sports teams. We both played soccer together when we were kids, but later on, each of us joined different sports teams. Jonah liked kicking the ball a lot. It was part of his personality, he loved to run and chase the ball. Jonah wanted to be free, and I think in soccer he found a way to release that energy. He ran non-stop without getting tired. I didn't understand what kind of joy he felt while running, but I began to realize as I got older that Jonah was trying to escape his pain. He was running away from the social rejection he had to face at a young age.

While Jonah was trying to find a way to express his feelings, I was different in the way I chose to express mine. I didn't realize at the time that I needed to fill my *social* passion. From a young age, I had developed a defense mechanism. I don't know if it was something I was born with or something unconsciously developed inside me. I did not tolerate others easily, so the rejection we experienced did not hurt me to the same degree as it did Jonah. Jonah is a pure angel, with a heart full of love that can cover the whole planet. He is peaceful, respectful, kind, and gentle. So, even though he was hurt badly, he was always forgiving. Even though things weren't good for either of us in sports, we were committed. We continued to play recreational sports and repeatedly tried to join teams from our community, where parents create the teams and one parent is the coach.

Since our teammates were the same peers from school who had rejected us, we were not welcomed onto any of these teams. We were not told anything explicitly, but their attitudes toward us made it obvious. If we stood by them in the field, they would not pass the ball to us, and they certainly would not invite us to their parties. Although we wouldn't understand until we were older why we were being treated that way, that this prejudice wasn't directed to us as individuals, but rather the race and ethnicity we represented. We didn't let this exclusion get us down. We maintained the same attitude with the same positive reaction to every unpleasant event we encountered, never allowing these negative forces to define us. We decided instead to focus on one goal: our academic excellence.

Our mother's daily motivational words inspired us: "Your education is your power. You need to be educated, and through knowledge, you will make a change for you and many children like you. Others' perceptions of you are their own; they have never been true, and they will not define you. Don't let anyone dim the light within you; follow your mind and control your feelings. Always forgive because, through forgiveness, you will be healed."

After disappointing experiences playing on traditional recreational sports teams, we started going to Taekwondo classes, as none of our peers practiced this sport. This was a way to escape our bullies. Unfortunately, we couldn't stop their pathetic laughter at us because we didn't play any "great sports" like they did. We weren't part of the "cool kids" who would talk about their sports games and tournaments as part of the classroom discussions in elementary school. I wasn't one of the "popular girls" who loved to dance or cheer. Jonah and I were both martial arts kids. We participated in a sport that no one else in our school played, therefore no one cared to hear about it. Although Taekwondo was an Olympic sport, none of our schoolmates or even some elementary school teachers saw it as a legitimate sport. They saw us as losers who failed to join a "real" sports team.

I still remember our elementary school years. How could I forget? It was a painful experience for both of us. Jonah wasn't allowed to play with the boys who were playing soccer at recess time because he wasn't part of any sports team. At the same time, a group of girls who were practicing gymnastics and dance were repeatedly calling me fat. It got to the point where they didn't even want to take a picture with me. I will never forget that feeling. We both carried a heavy pain on our fragile backs. Yet, it wasn't the fault of our peers; it was the fault of society. We live in a society that encourages stereotypes. Knowledge of other sports was not provided to our peers at that time. Respect for different sports and other cultures was also not taught. Many other children who were not part of a "popular sport" were victims of numerous acts of bullying. The community encouraged these acts by giving significant, unbalanced prestige to the children who played certain sports. It was as if the whole world revolved around those sports alone. But what about swimming, fencing, tennis, snowboarding, and many other sports out there?

We started to educate others about Taekwondo—providing information about it during our show-and-tell days at school, talking about it if we were

students of the week, or through the posters we made. We found opportunities to show our peers and teachers that Taekwondo is a well-known, well-esteemed and, most notably, an Olympic sport. Although our efforts to amplify the beauty of our sport did not change anyone's perceptions of it, we were able to feel the honor of being Taekwondo athletes. In fact, the older we got, the more we loved and committed to our sport. It was the values that were held behind the black belt and the principles that shone through the brightest white of our uniforms that attracted us. We studied Taekwondo, researched our sport, and read many books about the mind and body connection to understand our sport. Reading was our salvation.

Our journey toward black belts in Taekwondo has been rich in knowledge. We believe that the rejection we experienced played an essential role in amplifying our love for this sport. We may have been rejected because others saw us differently, but we did not let their rejection defeat us. We used it as motivation to find our purpose and to demonstrate that stereotypes never define who someone is. Stereotypes develop through a process of irrational perceptions by some people and then spread to others. We transformed the rejection of ourselves and our sport into a positive boost that made us yearn for success later in life. Obtaining our black belts has taken five years of continuous training and commitment. During that time, we continued to face harder things than most people our age, but redirected that energy into achieving our goals.

Finding our identities was not an easy thing to do. We have been through many struggles that have tested our mental capacity and challenged our patience. Sadly, the opinions that our peers and some members in the elementary school community have of us and our sport have not changed. We still suffer from a lack of respect for participating in a sport that is not seen as "cool." However, we have remained determined to reach the international level and prove that we are the only ones who can define ourselves. We have dedicated our time to enriching our minds with knowledge through the challenges and obstacles we face, sharpening our identities, and developing a long-term vision toward achieving the goals we intend to overcome and the dreams we want to make happen. Strengthening our mindset and shaping our identities was our ultimate goal.

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Me at a local tournament practicing my Green belt Forms, before I enters the mat to compete



Us at a local tournament where we won titles in a forms belt competition— Jonah was a blue-green belt, and I was an orange-green belt

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At our first opening in Las Vegas — We competed in the blue belt forms and sparring competition

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We are in our first color belt National Championship— We still haven't gotten our black belts yet

CHAPTER TWO Lost Identity (Jonah)

Identity. Who are we? Our behaviors, our dreams, and the way the world views us. Identity is what makes us who we are; it is a reflection of our principles, values, beliefs, attitudes, thoughts, and behavior. Identity is a unique trait that varies from person to person. Identity is created throughout our lives by the many situations we go through and the various challenges we face. Regrettably, some people allow the circumstances of their external environment to overly influence the formation of their identity, giving those characteristics too much weight. At the same time, others take control of the amount of external influence on their identification. As a result, they go through obstacles and face many confrontations to create their own identities and forge their own path. The nature of a person's identity is a choice. We choose our identity based on our interactions and reactions to the many challenges and events we face during our lives.

We were among those who refused to shape their identity based on the opinions of others. We refused to be ordinary and went above and beyond to form our identities. We rejected the stereotypes that others put on us. We refused to be labeled with titles that did not represent us, our thoughts, or our feelings. Throughout our journey, we have been searching for our lost identity—the one that was scared to be seen, scarred from rejection. We have gone through many twists and turns that put us on many difficult paths to finding the true "I am" behind the mask others wanted us to wear. Through these experiences, we have realized that the conditions in which we live—our surroundings, our environment, and the people who doubt us or do not believe in us—will never define who we are. Our personal experiences may help shape us, but in the end, we define who we are through the process we progressed through these experiences. The way we react to challenges, the changes we go through, and the obstacles we face define the true "me" within each one of us.

We have faced many obstacles that made us who we are today and what we want to be later in the future.

My Life at The Dojo (Jonah)

We spent our elementary school years trying to avoid any negativity. We focused on forming our own identities—not the ones that other people wanted us to have, but the ones we were happy to embody. We gradually began to exclude other sports from our daily physical activities and focused on the only sport we believed in. However, Sally continued to practice gymnastics in addition to Taekwondo, dividing her time between the two sports. After her daily three-hour gymnastics training, she immediately headed to the dojo to do Taekwondo training. She was strong. She never appeared tired and never complained. Sally was a role model for many dojo athletes, including myself.

Our Taekwondo journey toward our black belts was long, requiring daily lessons, including on the weekends. We took advantage of every opportunity and advantage the dojo offered. We loved Taekwondo very much and wanted to do our best to succeed.

Things went smoothly for the first two months of our black belt journey, until things changed at the dojo. Our initial coach quit so we were automatically reassigned to the dojo's headmaster and owner. We had never had a class with him before, as we were only at the intermediate level and he taught the seniors and the competition team. He seemed nice to us, and he made the lessons fun instead of serious. I felt he wanted to attract kids my age to stay because Taekwondo was not a popular sport. I was focused on my training and respectful of my Master. In return, the Master started showing an interest in my work ethic and invited me to join the Master's program, which was only offered to elite athletes of the dojo. It was a great opportunity for me to show my leadership skills and I began spending hours at the dojo helping younger kids learn the different forms of the sport.

Sally, on the other hand, wasn't having such an easy time. She was still balancing gymnastics and training at the dojo, but lamentably, her time at gymnastics was very challenging. She was being bullied by a group of girls who attended the same school we did, and that, in spite of her love for the sport, made her feel negatively about the gym. Our mother informed the gym owner of what was going on, but because there were so many athletes and the gym was so large,

the coaches couldn't keep up with what was going on between the girls during training. Fortunately, Sally's time at the dojo was much more positive. It didn't take long for the both of us to join the competition team, by invitation of the Master who saw something in us. It was a huge achievement for both of us, especially in front of our peers at school who grievously only increased their bullying.

The Competition Team Journey (Jonah)

Our mission changed the moment we joined the competition team; even though we were ultimately searching for our overall purpose in life, we found ourselves focusing on our next competitions. The team competition was different from recreational training. We were training with many athletes who were older than us and had more advanced ranked belts than us. Saturdays were team sparring days. We would attend sparring sessions with these athletes, without regard to massive differences in height, age, belt rank, or weight division. In spite of this, it was the most enjoyable time for me. I loved sparring and challenging myself to improve my skills, so much so, that I didn't give much weight to the huge differences between the seniors in our team and me. Sally had a different story, however. She hesitated kicking other athletes and sometimes cried because of it. Finally, after a long time, she started to develop a sense of excitement for competition, especially as she started working on building her self-confidence when we trained alone in our house.

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You would think that our achievement would bring us closer to our peers, but it did not. We started noticing that some of our teammates, those who were closer in age, had changed their behavior toward us, especially when we won our matches in the local competitions we attended with the team. They started staying away from us and avoided talking to us.

Things started to worsen when the team's groups developed, and we were left out. We thought "here we go again," as it felt too familiar from our previous sports experiences. Nobody wanted to be our partners, and kids our age on the team started complaining about our performance, how hard we kicked, and said that they couldn't train with us. Therefore, Sally and I had to train together all the time. We became partners in training and competition as well. We began to improve and develop fighting techniques. Our fighting style attracted the parents

there. We become known in the dojo for our disciplined techniques and skill. We focused on developing our techniques and ignored the irrational, negative feelings toward us.

At that time, the dojo's headmaster went through a family crisis that affected his judgment, professionalism, and behavior at the dojo. He became more aggressive and continually expressed his anger toward the team. He was always mad, he yelled a lot, and was suspicious of any behavior. We started to develop anxiety and fear toward him, as some of the younger kids were punished for simple mistakes. The dojo became a nightmare for everyone on the competition team.

In spite of the scary environment in the dojo, we became dominant and focused only on our mission. Our commitment to our mission was getting stronger day by day. Parents looked at us and started to pressure their kids to work harder. A split began to emerge between team members, and the Master did nothing to reunite the team. Unfortunately, the Master liked division and began using it to create a competitive appetite among team members. He seemed to enjoy watching what was happening and even appeared satisfied seeing team members insult each other during sparring sessions.

Competitiveness among team members started to go beyond the sparring sessions. It started to provoke negativity within the squad on top of the negative attitude the Master already showed toward the team. In fact, things only got worse at the dojo. After the Master's family crisis came to a sad ending, he began to unleash his anger on us and bully us for no reason. He told us that was how he would teach us discipline. The morale of the team just kept getting worse.

Bullying is a Sickness (Jonah)

The team members observed our Master and his actions as he was the role model. Since he was angry and treated others badly, the others began to copy his behavior. However, parents continued to complain about their children showing a lack of respect for our Master. What they didn't realize is that the team members would never have respect for someone who took a negative approach to teaching; someone who allowed aggression and bullying.

Our mother was our shadow: where we went, she went—not because she didn't trust us, but to protect and guide us. She always told us to show compassion and empathy for others, even if they offended us. We tried to stay positive and remain patient. Going to the dojo became a challenge for us. We started to have to separate our feelings from our training. We tried to be rational and not emotional about what we encountered. We understood that the bullying was not our fault, but a consequence of outside forces we could not control. Parents would drop their kids off at the gym and come back to pick them up at the end of each training session; while our mom was the only parent sitting and watching our training—something that made our Master uncomfortable. He didn't like the idea of our mother observing his aggressive behavior toward the team. He was a completely different person in the recreational classes, where parents spent less than an hour watching their children during form classes. We began noticing his aggression toward us, and he started attacking us because our mom was sitting and witnessing his unstable behavior all the time.

Aggression is a dangerous feeling that contains anger, sadness, hatred, and rejection. It can harm the person holding it, as well as the people they encounter. The aggressive behaviors of our former Master were increasing day by day, and his behaviors affected most of the young athletes in our gym. Everyone cultivated feelings of fear and anxiety toward him; some gave up, but many became copies of him. Our mother had to speak to the Master regarding this matter and explained to him that his aggression affected our well-being. The Master took offense at our mother's remarks, thinking she had invaded his territory as a coach. He didn't like this move and accused her of coaching us. A wide door of pain opened at that moment, as our Master changed his gym policy by indirectly encouraging our other teammates to start bullying us. His vanity blinded his vision as a coach and his professionalism as a Master.

While our journey began with pain, it was ultimately a journey toward self-discovery.

Pain Breeds Motivation (Jonah)

Bullying both at practice and at school forced Sally to quit gymnastics. Dealing with bullying in school, at the gym, unexplained aggression, and rejection in the

dojo—How could we cope with all this? We were young and just starting to see life. Would our lives always be like this? Is what is happening to us normal? There were many questions we asked our mother in hopes of getting rid of our pain.

Our mother always comforted us and told us stories of real people who had faced many challenges and rejections because they were different. She told us: "You have to accept that life is not easy; to achieve your goals, you have to face trials and difficulties, and you have to accept that many will stand in your way because you are different from them. This does not mean that you are wrong or that they are wrong. We are all different in many ways, but we will have peaceful and healed minds when we agree to accept other people's differences."

We knew that we needed to learn to adapt to any situation we faced, even if it was painful. We could not continue to run from obstacles or rejection. We had to start developing techniques to teach ourselves how to adapt to any obstacle. We must do as our mom advised us: "Escaping the obstacles you face by simply changing your paths will not solve your problem, and will never get you to your desired destination. Don't let this fear of rejection and the pain from the obstacles you encounter stop you from being the best version of yourselves."

This was our mother's daily motivational pep talk, and we trusted her. Her calm demeanor had always reinforced the importance of positivity in our lives. We knew she was right: running away from our bullies would never stop them from bullying us. Turning our backs on any obstacles or challenges we run into would never teach us how to reach our goals, nor would it help us achieve them. We needed to be strong enough to handle all the negative forces thrown at us, and we had to learn to forgive and move on. Forgiveness brings healing, and through healing we can restore our positive energy. A peaceful mind will give us a clear view and enhance our focus on the tasks ahead.

It wasn't an easy road, after all, we were just kids. How could our brains be expected to comprehend the size of obstacles we were facing? How could we raise our maturity to reach the highest levels of professionalism? Why do we have to go through this? All we wanted to do was to practice and learn a sport that we chose and loved so much. But the pressure of rejection, along with pressure from trying to find our identities and overcome our abilities were beyond the capabilities of young minds.

