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## PROFILE

Do What You Love...

Artist, third-degree black belt speaks on balance, happiness



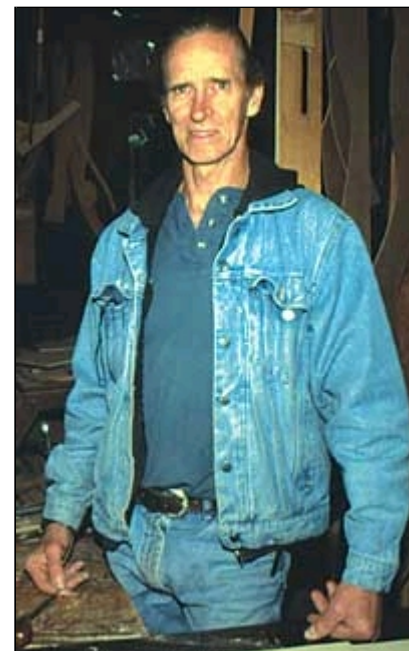
Back in the mid 1960s, when Ron Curtis and his wife Frances were in California enjoying the early bloom of their bohemian lives, Ron met a man who swam in the ocean every day and walked everywhere barefoot. This aging—he looked at least 40—naturalist was also a flamboyant potter with a small studio atop what is now Topanga Canyon. But he earned most of his money from real estate investments. Legend has it that he arrived barefoot once a year at his tenant's corporate headquarters to collect his check. "It turned out that he wasn't 40 after all—he was 60," recalls Ron. "And he was so vital and incredible looking that just seeing him on the street was an inspiration to me and he became my role model as I grew older."

In fact, Ron learned enough about role models to become one. He is 68 now and, with his six-foot frame and third-degree black belt in Tae Kwon Do, is inspiring others in turn.

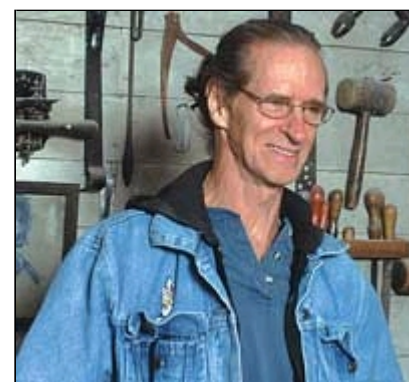
Ron took up the Korean martial art form just 10 years ago as an antidote to chronic joint pain. "It was hard to walk and my elbows hurt so badly that some days I had to lift my arm up with my other hand just to rest it on the table," he says. "I never imagined I could stick with Tae Kwon Do long enough to earn a black belt. Just getting through one class at a time was my immediate goal."

It was Frances who envisioned Tae Kwon Do as a path to healing for Ron. Their daughters had studied the martial art form for a few years in their teens and greatly benefitted from it. So she marched a reluctant Ron into the neighborhood Dojang (Tae Kwon Do school) one day and introduced him to an imposing Korean master, who agreed to take Ron on as a student. They worked out an exchange—three months of Tae Kwon Do lessons if Ron, an accomplished woodworker, would furnish the instructor's teenaged daughter's room. After completing a few bookcases, and a desk, Ron had taken enough classes to notice that his joint pain had totally abated—thereby sealing his passion for the sport. He continued the practice, working out three times a week, and climbing up the levels of proficiency as measured in the belts he achieved: white, yellow, yellow tip, green, green tip and blue, on up to first-, second- and finally third-degree black belt.

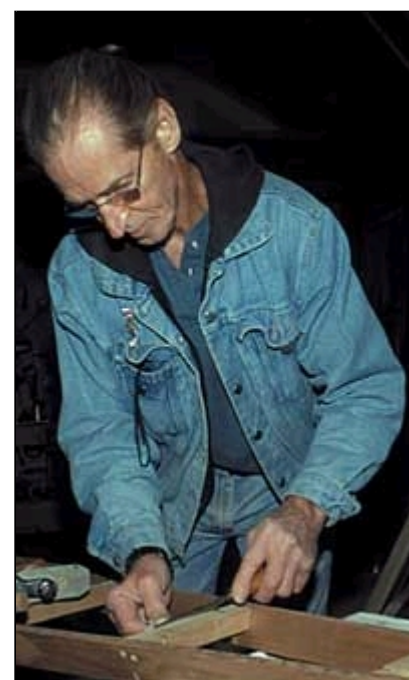
Each progression includes a series of 20 to 30 moves involving different kicks, punches and blocks, which Ron describes as similar to ballet, but very aggressive. After several years, he noticed that his once skinny legs had become powerful weapons. He was thrilled at the transformation, but realized that his new musculature hadn't spread to his upper body and that he needed to add a new component to his exercise regime. That's why, at age 65, Ron began serious weight training three times a week and also took up kayaking on the nearby Connecticut and Farmington Rivers and in Long Island Sound. "You'd think that would have been enough," says Frances. "But he took up mountain-biking too." At about the same time that he added the upper body workout to his program, Ron also started taking creatine to help build muscle mass. This expanded his daily vitamin routine, which, for many years, had had just one entry—a multivitamin designed for high-energy output. "I noticed a difference immediately after I started taking it," he says. Later, he designed his own combination of supplements he uses to this day that includes ginkgo biloba for brain enhancement, glucosamine with MSM to keep arthritis at bay ("Hey, I am 68," he reminds. "I do get arthritis."), garlic for health maintenance and as a shield against the flu, and a new, potent multivitamin. He'll often boost up on extra vitamin C and add vitamin E. "I haven't really been sick—just the occasional sniffles—since I quit smoking in 1977," he says.



Smoking? It may seem strange that someone so interested in preserving his youth and health ever had a pack-a-day habit—but Ron lit his first Camel at the age of 14 and it took a plea from his 13-year-old daughter, Jennifer, to convince him to quit. "She said, 'Dad, I don't want you to die,' "he recalls. "It brought a flood of tears to my eyes and the next day I went out and joined a smoke-enders program."



It was then that he began looking for activities that would keep him from thinking about smoking and decided to try jogging. (Though he had experimented with yoga earlier in his life, Ron jokes that his most serious brush with exercise before that had come during a brutal winter in Maine when he had had to stoke a wood fire and sprint occasionally to the outhouse.) On his first attempt at running he made it 30 feet and nearly collapsed. That proved to be a real wake-up call. Over time, Ron built up to the point that he was running two miles a day—a routine he continued until his joint pain first appeared 10 years ago.



Just as Frances encouraged Ron to pursue martial arts, so has she been his guide to nutritious eating. The Curtises were probably ahead of their time in their preference for low-fat and organic foods. And over the years they have experimented with all sorts of alternative diets. First came macrobiotic eating, in which they ate whole grains and cooked vegetables, along with several soy products like miso and tamari. That lasted about six months until Frances became pregnant and began craving yogurt, which had just recently been introduced in the states. Now they are on a particular diet. Neither Curtis eats wheat, corn or dairy products; Ron switched from coffee to green tea a few years ago.

"The interesting thing about food is that I tend to like the foods that I'm supposed to eat," he says. "But we are not purists. Pleasure is pleasure and we enjoy our share of chocolate and cappuccinos like anyone else."

Though the habitual exercise that culminated in Tae Kwon Do has played a critical role in Ron's fitness level, appearance and overall perspective, other factors have also been important. He's the first to admit that he was lucky to be born into a stellar gene pool. Two maternal aunts lived to be over 90 and over 100 respectively. His mother, at 88, is planning a trip to Germany in the spring and still drives.

And Ron believes that his chosen career path has also kept him sane and healthy. He started his professional life as an artist in New York City and has exhibited his semi-abstract oil paintings in galleries from Maine to California. He is represented in several museums, including The Newark Museum and the New Britain Museum of American Art.

"Being an artist... keeps you doing what you love and that



After a while, he turned his creative bent to woodworking and began designing “art” furniture, such as tables, chairs and armoires out of tiger maple, walnut and bubinga. He recently started to design and build boats, including an authentic Aleutian kayak. (You can see some of Ron's work at his website [www.roncurtis.com](http://www.roncurtis.com).)

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“I look at people working so hard in the corporate world and, from what I hear, it's so unfulfilling, I think it has to take it's toll,” he says. “Being an artist, even though we've never felt financially secure, keeps me doing what I love and that helps me stay balanced and happy. It may be because of that, that I'll be able to kick over my head when I'm 70.”

—Twig Mowatt

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