

## **A Tribute to Friendships**

Master Gong is deeply saddened by the loss of her long-time friend Master Ruben Casanova who was a student of Grand Master Suk Jun Kim since the early 1970's. This loss created a large void in both Grand Master Kim and Master Gong lives. Their friendship goes way back to GM Kim's Bergenfield NJ TKD School and their common bond and passion for taekwondo.

Master Gong and Master Casanova first crossed paths in Junior High School #125 around 1967 when they were two skinny 12-year-old kids living in the Bronx. Master Gong's grandfather signed her up to Sihak Henry Cho Bronx satellite school. One evening, in walked Ruben, his uncle Danny and his maternal grandfather. All of them were enrolled in the same S Henry Cho satellite school. All were practicing diligently every day, sometimes two classes per evening. This was the beginning of 47 years of friendship.

When it was time for college, Ruben, Danny and Anna all parted ways and headed off to college. Master Casanova attended City College of NY on Convent Ave studying architecture. Danny went to Peoria, Illinois, and Master Gong went to Fordham University. Master Casanova transferred to the Bergenfield Tae Kwon Do schools owned by Suk Jun Kim. Until his aunt give him her Volvo, GM Kim would drive Master Casanova home to the Bronx many evenings after practice.

As an official student of S J Kim Taekwondo, and with the guidance, teaching and nurturing of GM S J Kim, history was in the making. Grand Master Kim's elite team consisting of Keith, Nick and Ruben was formed. This team dominated every tournament they entered. Master Ruben Casanova had the ability to be ruthless and showed no mercy in a tournament. Master Casanova knew the consequences if he lost the match. He would have to face a fate worse than just losing to his opponent, and that was Grandmaster Kim, sometimes it started in the parking lot, other times back at the school.

Master Casanova looked up to Grand Master Kim as a father and that bond continued until his death in August 2014. Master Casanova had a special ability to knock you out without any hesitation, which put fear into all his opponents.

Master Gong and Master Casanova continued to stay in touch through their common passion, Tae Kwon Do. Master Gong occasionally stopped by GM Kim's Bergenfield Tae Kwon Do School to say hello even though no longer training at the same school. Traveling in the same circle of tournaments, Master Gong and Master Casanova had the respect and greeted each cordially. They reminded each other to always stay humble when not winning to keep their egos in check.

In 1987, GM Kim opened a school in Manhattan on 23rd street and Fifth Avenue. Master Gong officially enrolled and became student #36. Once again Master Casanova walked into the school one day on 23 Street school and saw Master Gong in her Tae Kwon Do uniform and he could not wait to put on his uniform and workout like old times.

Grand Master, Suk Jun Kim saw this friendship between Master Gong and Master Casanova, and during the late stage of his illness, GM Kim would say to Master Gong, "Have you spoken to Ruben?" Before the sentence could be completed, Master Gong was on the telephone with Master Casanova. Grand Master Kim was the overseer making sure that the bond never wavered. Tae Kwon Do has been and will always be a big part of Master Gong's life.

Master Gong will continue to have the same relationship with all TKD practitioners she encounters like Master Dr. Mark Nathanson, her friend and foot doctor for more than 25 years. Dr. Nathanson said, he would stop treating her feet if she continues to kick people. Master James Marr, the founder of Glen ridge TKD in New Jersey and another school in Ohio is a long-time friend. Masters John and Laura who have two beautiful daughters Margaret and Charlotte, who will follow the tradition of their parents. Master Morgan, another dear friend, whose first name is Linda, but that was only learned after many years. It had

always been Morgan. Then there is Master Dawn Sardinia who recently moved to California and is dearly missed by all. Master Gong likes to refer to Master Oscar Guevara as Captain Oscar Guevara and Master Quin as Master Sergeant Quin Pico. Both are retired marines who look after Master Gong like protective brothers. Finally there is the “Grand” "Grand Master Kim ", who did not treat Master Gong any differently because she was a female practitioner. She received no special treatment. GM Kim expected more of her because he knew there was this passion inside, and if he pushed the right way she could do it. Failure was not an option. If Master Gong did something wrong, Grand Master Kim would punish, correct and then smile. GM Kim certainly has this “charming smile” even as he is kicking you. That smile said it all. How could you not enjoy his ferocious kicks and punches?

Forging ahead, these TKD practitioners will always have a special place in Master Gong's life and heart. There are so many friends Master Gong has found with her many years of TKD practice. As a loyal and dedicated student to GM Kim, Master Gong is passionate about her practice, instilling kindness and integrity to all students. She tries to incorporate perseverance, and indomitable spirit in her daily life.

Master Gong has worked in New York City's most prestigious medical centers. She has co-authored several scientific journals and is a co-investigator on numerous clinical research studies which The FDA has approved several of the investigational products subsequently. During her spare time and to relief the daily stress, Master Gong attends Juilliard School of Performing Arts and Music.

As Master Gong embraces 60, she will continue to be a better TKD practitioner under the guidance of Grand Master Kim, and will always remember her humble beginning as a TKD practitioner. Like Vince Lombardi, winning wasn't everything, it was the only thing.