

OCTOBER 2016

granite bay

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Life Lessons

in The Studio

BY ANDREW WESTROPE

Martial arts and fitness center trains more than warriors

Amitis Pourarian, owner of The Studio Martial Arts & Fitness, has a “mat chat” with 3-5 year-old students in her Tiny Tigers program.

PHOTO BY
MATT WHITLEY

If there's one thing Granite Bay resident Amitis Pourarian has learned as a lifelong student of martial arts, it's that success or failure rests in her own hands.

With discipline, Pourarian knows her hands are capable — at 39, she's a seventh-degree black belt, a Kukkiwon-certified taekwondo master and owner of The Studio Martial Arts & Fitness at 8200 Sierra College Boulevard. Twenty-five years into what she intends to be a lifelong study of martial arts, Pourarian has found the discipline's most valuable lesson is not about punching and kicking but about self-determinism — about mastering one's own fate, with integrity — and in her estimation, it's what has made her school on the outskirts of Granite Bay one of the biggest in California.

Pourarian came to Northern California in a roundabout way, immigrating from Iran to Switzerland with her parents as a child, then to Michigan, then to Fair Oaks and finally to Folsom when she was about 5 years old. When she was 12 or 13, she went to a martial arts lesson with a family friend and immediately fell in love with it.

“Nobody has to pass you the ball for you to make the shot, and you can be as good as you want to be,” she says. “Everything is in your control.”

Pourarian gravitated toward the independence of it, and she has stuck with it ever since as a student and then a teacher, except for a short stint completing a master's degree in construction management at Stanford. She credits martial arts

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The Studio Martial Arts & Fitness

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INFO: (916) 258-KICK (5425) or trainatthestudio.com

At right: Amitis Pourarian says her students will stand at attention, even when she's not looking, until instructed otherwise.

Bottom right: Tiny Tigers at The Studio learn taekwondo. **At left:** The Studio has programs for all ages — 3-year-olds to grandparents.

Below: Six-year-old Cayden McKenzie waits for instruction at The Studio Martial Arts & Fitness.

PHOTOS BY MATT WHITLEY

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with building her confidence, making her athletic and even helping her through the thick of ivy-league academia.

Wanting to share this potential with other people, she quit her job working on \$600-million construction projects in San Diego and returned home to Granite Bay, where she opened The Studio in 2010.

Having only one student the first two weeks, there came a moment when she wondered what she'd done, trading a high-paying job in San Diego for an empty martial arts school. Pourarian says her business has since grown by word of mouth to become one of the largest of its kind in California and, she estimates, among the fifth percentile in the nation.

She says most martial arts schools have about 80-120 students; The Studio has over 700, accounting for formal students, who do the taekwondo program, and fitness members who do kickboxing, spin, yoga or other programs; and virtually all come from Roseville and Granite Bay.

Pourarian says The Studio has more than 150 active black belts, and tested almost 100 new black belts this year alone.

But crucially for Pourarian, The Studio is not only for the elite, welcoming everyone from 3-year-olds to grandparents. For kids under 4, a "mini ninjas" program teaches agility and coordination; for 3-5



year olds, a "tiny tigers" program; and so on, up to "life warriors," a non-contact martial arts program open to any age.

Pourarian says the programs aren't seasonal, so when kids enroll, she wants them until they go away to college; adults, for as long as they can kick and punch.

"There is no limitation. It is continuously ongoing and year round. Martial arts, there's no perfection. You can't end it," she says. "I happen to be a seventh-degree black belt, but I still train because I want to improve on my technique."

Pourarian says she has about two dozen "home-grown" instructors, former students of hers who are also doctors, business owners, restaurant entrepreneurs

— a diverse group that wants to pass on what martial arts have done for them.

When Pourarian looks at The Studio's place in the community, though, the business side of it — the programs, the fundraisers — are secondary. Her mission as an instructor, as she sees it, is to build the sort of character in her students and fitness members that led her to success — to train future leaders, more than warriors.

The payoff in martial arts comes not only from confidence but ideas of integrity, fairness, honor, courtesy and compassion, she says, and the fortitude to do the right thing even, or especially, when no one's looking.

Pourarian believes schools teach kids facts but not values, and in many cases parents seem too busy. At The Studio, she can teach kids to associate integrity with success.

In so many words, she wants to send good people out into the world.

"They go from being either a shy and timid kid — or a kid that's just average, does whatever — to becoming a self-motivated young person that wants to get good grades, wants to practice, wants to be above average not because they're told, but because it's a desire for them," she says.

For adults, the fitness demanded by martial arts is a reminder to take care of themselves, to maintain their health and be an example for their children.



In all cases, Pourarian says, it's a lifelong pursuit, not about perfection but growth and development.

"The biggest takeaway is that ... they don't need to rely on anybody else. I have this motto here: 'If it can be done, why not by you?'" she says. "My students are truly compassionate people, they're disciplined, they persevere, they're loyal, they're respectful, they have integrity, and if everybody had this core to them, we would live in an amazing world."

Growing The Studio from one member to 700 in seven years, Pourarian knows something about faith and tenacity, but what keeps her passion burning?

Watching people transform themselves into better people, she says, and learning their own stories of trial and triumph.

"I had a lady who literally got hit by a truck. Anybody else would have quit, with all the injuries she had," Pourarian says. "She focused, she came back, she tested for her black belt, she tested for her third-degree black belt. Where everybody's story would have ended, hers became the story of 'I didn't quit.'" ■

