

The Inevitable Business:
The Starkville Martial Arts Academy,
Dr. Chris Dewey, CEO.

It is said that the hinge of fate turns on small events, and from that perspective it is entirely possible that the Starkville Martial Arts Academy became an inevitable consequence of my life as far back as 1959 or 1968. A near-fatal childhood illness at the age of eighteen months left me smaller and weaker than my peers, so as a deterrent to further bullying, my parents started me in the martial arts at the age of twelve.

It is a strange thing, but before I started Judo, the club instructor visited my home to chat with my parents and I about the suitability of Judo for me. I trained on and off with that same instructor from age twelve until I left England for Canada at twenty-one to pursue a doctorate degree in geology. It was not until I found a Judo club in Canada that I found out that Roy Inman, the man who had been the foundation of my training was in fact an internationally recognized Olympic Coach.

By my mid-twenties, Judo was in my blood and a part of my spirit. So it is not surprising that when I moved from Canada to Mississippi in 1984 to take a permanent university faculty position, I would end up starting a martial arts club on campus. The club flourished as a broad-based martial arts club with a membership of just under 100 faculty and students and several instructors teaching and learning Judo, Hapkido, Taekwondo and Aikido.

In 1996, due to University building renovations and the size of our club, we looked at moving to an off-campus facility at least for the short term. So in the Fall of that year, I signed a lease on 213 Main Street and took a personal loan for a start-up business. I had a vision of what my ideal martial arts school would like and this would be a first step in that direction. My wife and I put everything that we had on the line, the house, the cars...all of it. If the business failed we would be financially ruined...and yet, in my heart of hearts I knew we would not fail. I knew I was taking a risk opening the business, and yet at another level there never really was a risk, there was merely the inevitable step of moving forward.

We began holding classes in the new premises as we remodeled. We would hold class, then, after class, call out for a pizza strike and work on the remodeling till the early hours of the morning in preparation for a Grand Opening to the public in January.

I had had my entrepreneurial seizure and was now in the trauma ward, dealing with the business consequences. Being a voracious reader and attracted by the inherent beauty of organization and systems I started applying my knowledge of ecology to running a business and began studying other martial arts businesses and the rise and fall of businesses on Main Street. I also started reading and listening to all manner of books and tapes on being an entrepreneur and how to create a successful business. The first three sets of tapes I listened to were Brian Tracy's Psychology of Success, Dale Carnegie's Leadership Course and Mike Gerber's E Myth.

Slowly my business stopped being a “club” and began to evolve into a real business entity. At that stage I was everything to the business...I was running a full time job as a university professor and at the same time I was growing a fledgling business and also embarking on a career as a professional martial artist...which were not exactly the same thing. I did the books, the marketing, the enrollment, the teaching, the cleaning and everything else that my fledgling start-up required. I saw that income was not nearly going to pay the bills, so I increased my fees and worked harder. I felt bad about using volunteers to help out, but reasoned that it was in part their business too, so they wouldn't offer to help if they didn't want to help. I simply didn't have the revenue stream in the early days to pay people for help, so I bartered training for help.

Eventually I hired a program manager, and suddenly had to learn how to manage a paid employee as well as a business, so the learning curve started all over again. At the beginning of the second year, I outsourced my accounting. These were tough months. I remember calling my accountant and telling her that I was not sure that I was going to survive the down turn that my business was taking during the slower summer months and that I would have to stop using their services. She called me back later in the afternoon and told me that her firm would give me three months of free accounting services and reduce my rates through to the end of the year because they believed in me and what I was trying to do. As I write the story I still feel the heart-touching emotion of that moment. I treasure the relationship with my accountant as one of the most precious business relationships that I have. Likewise, as I have moved from business loan to business loan, paying each off in turn before its maturation date, I have developed a strong bond with two bankers, both of whom I value deeply.

All the while the client base was creeping upward, the martial arts were working their magic in people's lives and we were growing black belts, slowly and carefully like a holistic gardener who wants to maintain his links to the land and not force his vision of the garden upon the soil and the plants. The business was becoming a metaphor for the martial arts themselves. The business mission was beginning to take hold. We are a service business that is “Committed to Personal Growth.” That says it all right there.

At the end of my fifth year I read the E Myth Revisited and could see some new problems coming towards me and as a result of reading the book, I completely revised my business model and structure. I started looking at the systems I had already built and began to evaluate how effective they were going to be in the future. Now, as I approach the fifteen-year mark I want my business to take on a systems-driven personality that does not need me to sustain it. I want my people to understand how the business works and how its life is sustained by nurturing the systems and helping them to evolve.

The Starkville Martial Arts Academy is ecological. We are deeply rooted in the best things that the martial arts traditions stand for and we are a business that exists to improve the quality of the lives we impact. As my knowledge of business ownership deepens I can see some of the pitfalls I have side stepped, some of the mistakes that have made me stronger, some of the near-misses that caused my heart to race and sleep to be

lost, and at the same time, I have worked with some amazing people and have fallen in love with the business over and over again. The business in its current form is not my “ideal” business; it is still evolving, just like a natural ecosystem evolves along with changes in the energy and resources that flow through it.

My business now has six part time employees and supports environmental conservation efforts with monthly donations. We give training scholarships to at-risk children. Each month the business distributes a newsletter about personal growth, which is reaching a wider and wider audience.

As my vision deepens and broadens, more than anything else I want my business to touch people in such a way that it makes them want to improve their lives in all areas of growth. I want my business to exude a sense of gratitude to everyone it touches. My business exists as a result of unseen and unexpected turns in the road of life. The people to whom I owe a debt of gratitude is long and the only way that I will ever be able to repay that debt is by creating a business that says thank you to its clients, its managers, instructors and employees, its suppliers and supporters and those unknown souls in the background who may have no idea of the impact that they have had.

My business exists because a man who was humble enough not to tell the world he was an Olympic Coach took the time to visit a scrawny little twelve-year old boy and change his life. My business has survived its many challenges and hurdles because a man who has never met me created an audio series called the E Myth, which gave me valuable lessons about how to build a business.

We are all part of something larger than ourselves. We create things that take on a life of their own and we learn about life as we do so. The ripples we create by our actions travel far out into the future and move sand on the shores of lands that we do not even know exist. Owning a martial arts small business is a seemingly small matter in the greater scheme of things, but with each life it touches a new ripple is created...and who can tell what the ripple may become?