Sidedoor: Season 11, Episode 15 – The Art of the Fist transcript

Lizzie Peabody: This is Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX. I'm Lizzie Peabody.

Lizzie: When Terence Nicholson was a kid, he'd come home from school and have the house to himself.

Terence Nicholson: *I remember one time I tried to make a popsicle out of Fritos, and that didn't work at all. That was horrible.*

Lizzie: *A popsicle out of Fritos?*

Terence Nicholson: *Yeah, like, put some Fritos in a Ziploc bag, and rolled it with a rolling pin, and added some water and stuck a Popsicle stick in the bottom of the bag. And ...*

Lizzie: *And put it in the freezer?*

Terence Nicholson: *Yeah, thought it would freeze and make a—you know, I mean I would experiment with all manner of stuff, you know?*

Lizzie: *It sounds like a good science experiment, honestly*

Terence Nicholson: *Yeah, yeah. This was before we had a cat that I could blame that stuff on. [laughs]*

Lizzie: Terence was an only child, raised by his mom in Southeast Washington, DC. When he wasn't innovating new food delivery systems or doing homework, he did what many other latchkey Gen Xers did before their parents got home—he watched cartoons.

Terence Nicholson: *Tom and Jerry. The Flintstones.*

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, The Flintstones:** Yabba Dabba Do!]*

Terence Nicholson: *The Fantastic Four.*

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, The Fantastic Four:** Flame on!]*

Lizzie: And while he was watching those cartoons, there was a commercial that would come on every single day like clockwork. In the commercial, a muscular man in long, flowy pants and no shirt is doing a flying kick through the air.

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, advertisement:** When you take Jhoon Rhee's self defense ...]*

***Terence Nicholson:** You know, and then you got people, like, you know, punching and flipping and stuff like that.*

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, advertisement:** Nobody bothers me.]*

Lizzie: And in perfect 70's style, it's all happening in slow motion.

***Terence Nicholson:** The slow motion is definitely everything, right?*

Lizzie: At the end of the commercial, a young girl comes on and says ...

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, advertisement:** Nobody bothers me.]*

Lizzie: And then a boy, even younger, says ...

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, advertisement:** Nobody bothers me either.]*

Lizzie: And then he winks. It's adorable.

***Terence Nicholson:** I was sold, and I asked my mom could I go?*

Lizzie: She said yes, and Terence started taking the bus an hour across town each week for taekwondo lessons—a journey that would change his life. But Terence wasn't the only kid to see this ad.

***Sojin Kim:** If you grew up in Washington, DC in the '70s and '80s it's, like, embedded in your head.*

Lizzie: Sojin Kim is curator for the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center's exhibition "Sightlines: Chinatown and Beyond." She grew up with this commercial too, and she says the guy in the ad—the shirtless one slo-mo kicking—he's not some stunt guy. He's Jhoon Rhee.

Sojin Kim: *Who some people refer to as the father of American taekwondo, the person who really popularized it in the United States.*

Lizzie: The United States has more martial arts schools than any other country—by far. Chances are you or someone you know took karate or some other form of martial arts growing up. But how did Asian martial arts get so popular in the United States? This time on Sidedoor, how one Korean immigrant's bare-knuckled American dream helped transform the cultural landscape of an entire country, and changed the lives of generations of Americans. That's coming up, after the break—of this board. With my head.

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Lizzie: Martial arts is the art of combat. There are different styles and traditions, each with their own rules, like any artform. It dates back more than 4,000 years, with the most common styles coming from East Asia, places like China and Japan.

Sojin Kim: *As long as there have been probably Asian immigrants in the United States, there have probably been people who were practitioners of these martial arts.*

Lizzie: The Smithsonian's Sojin Kim again.

Sojin Kim: *We've seen photographs of, for instance, lion and dragon dance in Chinese communities in the late 1800s. And lion and dragon dance are forms that are based in Chinese martial arts traditions.*

Lizzie: At this time, martial arts were mostly practiced within Asian communities, but around the turn of the century in 1900, America started spreading its military might around the world, and a byproduct of this was a cultural exchange. And there was one prominent American at this time who fell in love with martial arts.

M. Aziz: *Fun fact, President Roosevelt practices Japanese judo in the basement of the White House in the early 1900s.*

Lizzie: *What?*

M. Aziz: *Yes. Yes.*

Lizzie: M. Aziz is an assistant professor of African-American studies and gender studies at the University of Washington, and a martial arts practitioner of more than 20 years.

Lizzie: *if I were to kick my right leg at your chest, how would you block it?*

M. Aziz: *Oh, I would move out the way, because ... [laughs]*

Lizzie: *Do I look that strong? [laughs]*

Lizzie: M's shaolin style is no match for my crouching tiger style. Anyway, M. says Theodore Roosevelt actually suggested that American soldiers start practicing Asian martial arts like judo.

M. Aziz: *And so Teddy Roosevelt is very convinced that particularly Japanese descended martial arts are actually more effective forms of hand-to-hand combat, and he tries to convince other officials who are in the military that that's the case.*

Lizzie: The officials looked at the president—who was known for boxing, mountain climbing and hunting lions—and they were like, "Thank you for the suggestion, sir, but we will stick with our current form of combat."

Lizzie: But that all changed in the 1940s. Following World War II, the United States didn't just leave the countries it had defeated. We stuck around, occupying places like Okinawa, an island prefecture about 400 miles south of mainland Japan. This also happens to be the birthplace of karate.

M. Aziz: *And that's actually how we get much more practice of karate, for example, because karate comes from Okinawa. And so karate really comes out of that World War II, Cold War era.*

Lizzie: American soldiers who were stationed in Okinawa began to learn karate, and when they returned to the United States, they brought their skills with them. This is the same thing that happened when America entered another war in Asia a few years later, this time, on the Korean Peninsula.

*[**NEWS CLIP:** The Asiatic line against communism is to retake Seoul, drive the invader out of*

Sidedoor: Season 11, Episode 15 – The Art of the Fist transcript

South Korea, protect Formosa and the democratic interests in Japan.]

Lizzie: The Korean War started in the summer of 1950. That's when South Korea and America's fates became intertwined in an allyship that also changed the future for a young Korean man named Jhoon Rhee.

Lizzie: Jhoon Rhee was born in Korea in 1932, when it was occupied by Japan. He was about six years old when he discovered taekwondo.

Chun Rhee: *The story that he tells us is that he got beat up in school.*

Lizzie: *Oh, no!*

Chun Rhee: *But it was by a girl.*

Lizzie: *Oh, no! [laughs]*

Lizzie: Chun Rhee is Jhoon Rhee's son. He says Jhoon started taking taekwondo lessons to make sure no more girls could smack him around on the playground. And just to make it super clear, taekwondo is the Korean style of martial arts. Karate is from Japan. Kung Fu is from China. There are countless more styles, but you get the point. Anyway, Jhoon hid his lessons from his father because taekwondo didn't have a very good reputation in Korea at that time.

Jimmy Rhee: *If you are a taekwondo practitioner, either you got beat up by somebody so you did it to defend yourself, or you're one of the gangsters who used it to oppress people, okay?*

Lizzie: Jimmy Rhee is also one of Jhoon Rhee's sons.

Jimmy Rhee: *The perception wasn't that good because there are more of the bad people doing taekwondo than the good people like my father, right, who did it to defend himself.*

Lizzie: In his teen years, Jhoon moved to the capital of South Korea, Seoul, and studied taekwondo under Grandmaster Won Kook Lee, one of the creators of taekwondo. When the Korean War began in 1950, he enlisted to become a soldier, helping translate for American troops. Although, he later admitted to Jimmy ...

Jimmy Rhee: *"I didn't even know what the heck they were speaking, but I acted like I knew." [laughs] That's classic him, okay? You know, he would jump into the water and say, "I'll find out how to swim after I jump into the water." [laughs]*

Lizzie: And Jhoon had been American dreaming since he was a teenager.

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, Jhoon Rhee:** I watched American movie when I was 14 and 15.]*

Lizzie: This is from a news story featuring Jhoon Rhee later in his life.

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, Jhoon Rhee:** And so I said to myself at a young age, "Someday I want to marry American blonde. So only way to do that, I have to go United States.]*

Lizzie: And when the war ended, he was invited to attend college in America—a reward for helping American soldiers, and a dream come true. Jhoon arrived in San Marcos, Texas, when he was in his late twenties to study architecture. It was the late 1950s, and while he was there ...

Jimmy Rhee: *He opened up a small karate studio. At the time, no one used the word "taekwondo," okay? It was karate. And then he saw how popular it became.*

Lizzie: This was an "aha" moment for Jhoon. He knew taekwondo, and he knew he wanted to be successful in America. Maybe America needed taekwondo more than it needed another architect. So in 1962, he packed up his bags and headed for the place he could make the biggest impact.

Jimmy Rhee: *He told me one time, "I came to Washington, DC, because that's the center of the world, okay?" [laughs]*

Lizzie: When Jhoon Rhee arrived in Washington, DC, in 1962, martial arts was still pretty fringe. Basically, the only people practicing it were Asian immigrants or American veterans who'd learned it during their service overseas. But Jhoon took a different approach than other Asian masters or veterans.

Chun Rhee: *My father was kind of the first to say, you know, open it up to the general public. It was kind of like, you know, done within, you know, communities, very closed door. But he was the first to say, "Hey, this is for everybody."*

Lizzie: So Jhoon opened his studio in DC, but then he was like, "Huh. How do I get people interested in something they've never heard of before?" Well, you create a spectacle. In this case, a karate tournament.

Chun Rhee: *The way he promoted it is with my uncles and my mother. They would literally walk the streets of DC, and just post signs on the telephone poles, you know, with nails. I mean, it was hours and hours of just posting.*

Lizzie: But the hustle paid off. Thousands of people showed up to the tournament, and Jhoon Rhee wowed the crowd with his skills.

Jimmy Rhee: *Dad was known for doing high kicking, meaning jump kicking. I mean, he could fly. I mean, practically like a bird. He could fly up in the air, and throw a difficult sidekick three times before he landed.*

Lizzie: Three kicks in one jump. Try doing just one jump kick. People were awed by Jhoon's skills, and as you can imagine, students started pouring into his school to learn their own flying kicks. And he began traveling the country to give demonstrations. At a tournament in 1964, one of these demos caught the attention of someone whose name you might recognize.

Chun Rhee: *My father did a demonstration where he would jump five feet in the air and break three boards. So Bruce Lee was impressed with that, and that's how they started their friendship.*

Lizzie: Bruce Lee, a kung fu fighter from Hong Kong who was living in Oakland at the time. A friendship between the two ignited almost immediately. As Jimmy Rhee puts it ...

Jimmy Rhee: *They were passionate. I think those two guys were somewhere in between being passionate and being crazy, right?*

Lizzie: Jhoon was known for his kick. Bruce was known for his punch—particularly his famous one-inch punch.

Jimmy Rhee: *He would put a fist before somebody's chest, one inch away, okay? Big football player, right? And he will just push his fist one inch, and that guy will be thrown back, like, 25 feet, okay? It just displays power.*

Lizzie: Bruce taught Jhoon to punch, and Jhoon taught Bruce to kick. They'd stay up all night sparring at Jhoon's home in Arlington.

Jimmy Rhee: *I used to complain all the time. "Mom, when is that guy going back home, okay?"*

Lizzie: Bruce and Jhoon didn't just trade blows, they waxed on about philosophy and art. Both men were happy to break with tradition to better their art, especially Jhoon.

Chun Rhee: *He always said he's never making changes, he's always making improvements.*

Lizzie: Jhoon's improvements, however, put him at odds with the official taekwondo organization back in Korea. The masters back in his home country said ...

Jimmy Rhee: *You are softening taekwondo, okay? You're watering down taekwondo." But my father thought otherwise, okay? He said, "Do you want to be a spectator sport like boxing, where everybody wants to watch a boxing match, but you would not want your son to become a boxer, okay? Rather, you need to become a participant sport."*

Lizzie: When Jhoon first started teaching martial arts in DC, most of his students were macho men who were all about kicking each other in the face. But if Jhoon was going to make martial arts a participant sport, he'd have to find a way to make it safer for people who did not want to show up to work in a neck brace, and for, you know, kids. Even in the 1960s, American parents weren't too keen on their kid getting a barefoot kick in the nose. So Jhoon, being the innovator he is, innovated.

Jimmy Rhee: *We would drive together in our car, and then he would say, "Put this headgear on." So I would have headgear on, sitting on the passenger side of the front seat.*

Lizzie: Jimmy was the guinea pig for Jhoon's new creation—safety gear. Things like a padded helmet. Every time they'd stop at a traffic light, Jhoon would give Jimmy a little jab in the head, and then ask him ...

Jimmy Rhee: *"How do you feel?" And I'm going, "Okay, it's good." [laughs] The car that's waiting for the signal to change might look at us and me getting hit. They're looking at me going, "That adult is beating up on a young son." [laughs]*

Lizzie: I still don't know why this had to happen while they were driving, but hey, it was the '60s. And Jhoon also had another idea to adapt taekwondo to attract more people. It came to him while he was watching the Olympics. He asked Jimmy to mute the TV while he took a phone call.

Sidedoor: Season 11, Episode 15 – The Art of the Fist transcript

Jimmy Rhee: *And then after he hung up, he goes, "You know, that ice skating without music doesn't look very exciting, right?" You know? And so he said, "Boom! Why not?"*

Lizzie: He had an idea.

Jimmy Rhee: *He introduced that Beethoven Fifth music, the classical music—ba da ba bam, ba da ba bam.*

Lizzie: Jhoon set martial arts movements to music, what he called "martial ballet."

Jimmy Rhee: *And that was the beginning of the musical form, okay, that everybody does today, right?*

Lizzie: He also realized that Americans were a little more impatient than Koreans.

Jimmy Rhee: *Traditionally, there were only four belts in martial arts—white, blue, red, and black.*

Lizzie: You could spend years advancing from one belt to the next. But Jhoon was like, "Hmm. How am I gonna get a 10 year old to commit to four years just to move up one belt?"

Jimmy Rhee: *And so he created a new system where he put different colors, like a yellow, green, before blue, and then, you know, purple and, you know, other colors, right?*

Lizzie: And you could earn stripes on each belt as you advanced. If you've ever taken karate, you know what I mean. That was all Jhoon.

Jimmy Rhee: *So all those things, he was instrumental in creating that type of system that everybody practices today. That was also good for business.*

Lizzie: Jhoon Rhee was a taekwondo grandmaster, but he was a businessman through and through. And he had a knack for marketing.

Jimmy Rhee: *He was a marketing genius, to be honest with you. He really was a marketing genius. I think he should have worked for Procter and Gamble, okay? [laughs]*

Lizzie: Instead, he made one of the most iconic commercials the DC region has ever seen.

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, advertisement:** Nobody bothers me.]*

Lizzie: Remember the little kid who winks at the end of this commercial?

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, advertisement:** Nobody bothers me either.]*

Lizzie: That was Chun Rhee.

***Lizzie:** It was the wink. It was all in the wink.*

***Chun Rhee:** Yeah, the wink was pretty good, but with the jingle it definitely made it a pretty memorable commercial.*

Lizzie: One of Jhoon's students wrote the jingle—a musician named Nils Lofgren, who would later play with Bruce Springsteen.

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, advertisement:** Call USA-1000.]*

***Jimmy Rhee:** It's an amazing jingle!*

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, advertisement:** Jhoon Rhee means might for right.]*

Lizzie: The commercial played across the mid Atlantic from Pennsylvania to North Carolina for the next 20 years. And it was amazing for business. Jhoon had 10 studios in the DC area at the time.

***Chun Rhee:** And in each of the schools, you know, they were packed. 200, 300 students, which is—back then was really pretty amazing.*

Lizzie: Things were going well for Jhoon, and also for his friend Bruce Lee. In the '60s, Bruce helped popularize martial arts with his TV roles in *The Green Hornet* and *Batman*, and later with a number of kung fu films. Bruce had even gotten Jhoon a movie deal for a movie called *When Taekwondo Strikes!*

Jimmy Rhee: *It didn't win an Oscar award or anything like that, but that was his beginning. [laughs]*

Lizzie: Bruce was one of Jhoon's biggest supporters and closest friends. The two men wrote dozens of letters back and forth,sharing business ideas and poetry. In the summer of 1973, Bruce called Jhoon from Hong Kong. They chatted for a while, then said goodbye. And the next day, Jhoon turned on the radio.

Lizzie: The news report from Hong Kong says Bruce Lee had suddenly died from a brain injury at the age of 32. Jhoon was shocked.

Jimmy Rhee: *Oh, he was devastated. I mean, you know, he didn't come out for a week or two. He was devastated. That was one of his closest friends.*

Lizzie: Still to come, Jhoon Rhee kicks down the halls of Congress and teaches one of the world's most famous punchers how to punch even better. We'll have more on that after the break.

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*[**ARCHIVE CLIP:** Our "Man of the Century is a native Korean who has made his home here in Washington.]*

Lizzie: In 1976, a DC charity called The Touchdown Club announced the winner of its biggest award, "Man of the Century."

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP:** He is Jhoon Rhee, widely known as the king of American taekwondo.]*

Lizzie: It was a star-studded ceremony. Basketball star Wilt Chamberlain and boxer Muhammad Ali were there, too. Jhoon, who was under five foot and a half, stood on stage and said …

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, Jhoon Rhee:** Muhammad Ali and Wilt Chamberlain have been disputing who is the greatest the past few years. Now you just heard Jack Anderson say who is the greatest.]*

[laughter]

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, Jhoon Rhee:** I think it might not be big enough platform for Muhammad Ali. I think it's big enough for me to demonstrate, to settle for good who is the greatest.]*

Lizzie: Jhoon challenges Ali to come to the stage, takes off his suit jacket like he's getting ready for a fight.

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, Jhoon Rhee:** Wilt Chamberlain, I don't want you to come at the same time. I want you to wait until I finish him up, then you can come out.]*

[laughter]

Lizzie: The men never actually fought, but they did have a good laugh. Afterwards, a friendship began. Jhoon called Ali "Champ," and gave him advice on how to improve his punch. He said, "Listen, Champ ..."

***Jimmy Rhee:** "When you punch, before you punch, your face expression changes, meaning you're telegraphing before you're punching, okay?"*

Lizzie: Jhoon said, "Knock it off."

***Jimmy Rhee:** If you're gonna smile, smile all the way through the punch. That way your opponent cannot anticipate when you're punching.*

Lizzie: He also gave Ali a pointer on what to do with his fists.

***Chun Rhee:** My dad said, you know, when you punch, you don't just throw a punch. You have to twist your fist into the—into the target, kind of like a screw to get maximum impact.*

Lizzie: The next fight, Ali gave Jhoon's advice a whirl.

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP:** It's all over. It's all over, Muhammad Ali has beaten Mr. Dunn.]*

***Jimmy Rhee:** The next bout, Muhammad knocks out his guy. And afterwards he said, "Grandmaster Jhoon Rhee taught me this punch called accu punch."*

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, Muhammad Ali:** When you hit a man, as soon as you hit him, you turn it.*

Sidedoor: Season 11, Episode 15 – The Art of the Fist transcript

It's a quick [punching sound]. This is called the Unique Accu Punch.]

Jimmy Rhee: *He just made it up at the time, right? [laughs]*

Lizzie: Ali wasn't the only powerful person Jhoon taught how to punch. Power comes in many forms—including in suits. In 1965, Congressman James Cleveland was walking down the streets of Washington, DC, when he was attacked by a mugger who stole his wallet and left him injured. The next day, Jhoon Rhee read about the mugging in the newspaper and he picked up the phone.

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, Jhoon Rhee:** My name is Jhoon Rhee, I teach self defense. If you learn my stuff, you will never be mugged again.]*

Lizzie: This is from a news program about Jhoon Rhee. And the Congressman said, "Yes, please come teach me how to defend myself." And Jhoon said, "All right, I'll be there bright and early in the morning." Meaning 6:30 am.

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, Jhoon Rhee:** And so there were about four congressmen that participated when I came.]*

Lizzie: And the congressmen fell in love with taekwondo. Word quickly spread through the House and Senate, and soon Jhoon was teaching lawmakers from both chambers and each side of the aisle how to kick a little political patootie twice a week.

Chun Rhee: *I remember Tuesday, Thursday morning, he'd get up at five in the morning. And the Rayburn House Gymnasium, they let him use the gymnasium and anybody who wanted to take lessons took lessons. And he did it for, like, 30 years.*

Lizzie: *Wow!*

Lizzie: Actually, it was 40 years. Jhoon had moved to DC to be at the seat of power. Now he was in the halls of Congress—or the gym of Congress—working directly with lawmakers. And so Jhoon did what any martial arts teacher probably would have done in that situation, he held a little friendly competition.

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, Jhoon Rhee:** Next match is going to be Republican versus Democrat.]*

Lizzie: This is from a news story covering one of Jhoon's bipartisan taekwondo matches.

Chun Rhee: *These guys, there was—I think there's film of it, and these guys sparred pretty hard.*

Lizzie: The two lawmakers, wearing red padded gloves and helmets, spar in front of a crowd of spectators. They start out with some kicks, and then start punching each other. And after about 15 seconds, the fight's broken up. The match ends in a draw, and then the news anchor comes on.

*[**NEWS CLIP:** No one's going to believe me when I go back to the station and tell them I saw some congressmen fighting in the street.]*

Lizzie: Jhoon said he loved teaching lawmakers taekwondo. I mean, he did it twice a week for free for 40 years. But he also had other reasons.

Jimmy Rhee: *He did not let an opportunity, you know, slip by there, right?*

Lizzie: Jhoon used his connections in the Capitol to create connections between his new home, the US, and his original home, Korea. See, the Korean War had left South Korea economically devastated.

Jimmy Rhee: *Korea was a really poor country, right? North Korea was more affluent than South Korea back then.*

Lizzie: Jimmy says that besides being one of the poorest countries in the world, nobody in America really knew anything about Korea. China and Japan were the big players in Asia. South Korea was just a place where a war had happened. But Jhoon wanted to spread more of his Korean culture—not just taekwondo—to Americans.

Jimmy Rhee: *Every time he did a demonstration, he had people wearing traditional Korean clothing, okay? Every time he had some sort of gathering, he would have people bring traditional Korean food, bulgogi, like, all the grilled Korean food. Back then, they were strange foods.*

Lizzie: And being such a poor country, it was hard for South Korean lawmakers to get much attention on Capitol Hill.

Jimmy Rhee: *Back then, the Korean politicians would come to the US, and U.S. politicians would not meet with them because they were insignificant, right? So the ambassador would call my father and go, "Master Rhee, can you have one of your students at the US Congress meet these visiting Korean politicians?" So my father would call them, "Hey, can you come out?" And they would reluctantly come out. "Yes, sir, Master Rhee." [laughs]*

Lizzie: There are a lot of reasons South Korea and the United States formed a close relationship over the past 75 years, but you'd be missing at least one reason if you didn't include Jhoon Rhee. And in the summer of 1976, Jhoon got a chance to return to his home country of South Korea.

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP:** Ali has grabbed the ropes.]*

Lizzie: He joined Muhammad Ali on a trip to Japan to fight a wrestler named Antonio Inoki.

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP:** That was a foul on Inoki.]*

Lizzie: And after the fight ...

Chun Rhee: *My dad kind of arranged for Ali to visit Korea on a short-term notice.*

Lizzie: Cheering fans greeted Ali and Jhoon as they rode from the airport into the capital of Seoul.

Jimmy Rhee: *They had more than a million people that came out in the street greeting them.*

Lizzie: It was a tremendous homecoming for Jhoon. He had come full circle—or full roundhouse—from where he started. Around the same time that Jhoon returned to South Korea, a 10-year-old from Southeast DC named Terence Nicholson saw a commercial on TV with a man doing a flying kick through the air, and a small kid winking.

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, advertisement:** Nobody bothers me either.]*

Terence Nicholson: *So this was sort of my gateway into martial arts.*

Lizzie: Terence says he'd been struggling with confidence when he signed up for Jhoon Rhee's studio. But that changed when he put on his taekwondo uniform.

Terence Nicholson: *I used to really want to just go all the way across town in my uniform. My mom was like, "No."*

Lizzie: *You wanted to wear it everywhere?*

Terence Nicholson: *Chains. Right. She was like, you—if she would—if I would've got away with it, I would have traveled all the way across town with my head gear on and everything on. I just was excited. Plus, I was a show off.*

Lizzie: Terence did taekwondo for years, and later moved on to Chinese kung fu, eventually even winning the World Kung Fu Championship! But he says, beginning from those first days at Jhoon Rhee's studio, he always wondered why he felt a sense of safety when he put on his uniform.

Terence Nicholson: *Why is it when I would put on my gi, would I feel empowered. Because the power isn't in the—it's just cotton. It's just a cotton thing that I'm wearing.*

Lizzie: As he got older, he realized that sense of power and security came from the community he had joined, the traditions he'd adopted, and the belts he and his classmates had spent countless hours working to achieve.

Terence Nicholson: *And I think about when I first started training, a sense of, like, I worked for this, my classmate worked for this, and she worked for that, and she worked for that. And here we all are in our uniforms that we earned.*

Lizzie: That feeling inspired Terence—who's now a visual artist, in addition to a martial artist—to make a sculpture. It looks like a martial arts jacket, but it's sort of a mosaic, woven together from old belts given to him by his kung fu teacher. The piece, which he titled "Safety Jacket," is now on display at the Asian Pacific American Center's exhibition, "Sightlines." Terence says the safety jacket is a monument to martial arts and all of his teachers, but at its core, it's about a feeling.

Terence Nicholson: *It's love. As I sit back from it and time has passed, what is starting to really come clear to me about that piece particularly, is that it's really about love. Oh, boy. I never know when that's gonna happen.*

Lizzie: The bond between a student and a teacher in martial arts runs deep. In the words of Terence, "It's love." When Jhoon Rhee died in 2018, at the age of 86, countless students and admirers came to his funeral to express their love for him—including former House Speaker Paul Ryan.

Sidedoor: Season 11, Episode 15 – The Art of the Fist transcript

*[**ARCHIVE CLIP, Paul Ryan:** He was a pioneer and a great patriot, too. Countless people live their lives with character and integrity today based on the lessons that he instilled in them.]*

***Chun Rhee:** I mean, his life was taekwondo. For someone to have just a one-track mind, I mean, from age 25 to the day he passed, it was just taekwondo.*

Lizzie: Jhoon Rhee came from one of the poorest countries in the world with nothing, and he fought his way into halls of congress, film and television. He befriended some of the greatest sports champions and political minds of the century. And he helped make Asian martial arts a popular pastime for many Americans. Sojin says ...

***Sojin Kim:** I feel like it's so embedded. Like, you don't even necessarily see it. It's, like, there, and it infuses many aspects of American popular culture now.*

***M. Aziz:** You could put on a Megan Thee Stallion video, or some of the most popular rappers of the last five years. And you can see Megan Thee Stallion and her background dancers doing kicks in choreography. Or, you know, Kendrick Lamar is once—again, another one of the most important rappers of this era. I mean, he calls himself "Kung Fu Kenny."*

Lizzie: It's estimated that Jhoon Rhee's teachings have led to more than 100,000 people getting black belts, and changed the lives of countless others.

***Jimmy Rhee:** When you live like my father, you know, we really work towards that America which truly lives up to his ideals, right? And that really celebrates our diversity as our strength, right? And I believe that his legacy is yeah, you can go from here to there with dedication, commitment and vision and whatnot, right? That we all talk about, and it's real. And you can change the world that way.*

Lizzie: Jhoon Rhee was always looking for ways to improve what he was doing, to reach more people with the art form he believed in. But at the very end of his life, he surprised his son Chun.

***Chun Rhee:** One of my, my dad's last words is, you know, we—he was at his—at the hospice, and kind of out of the blue, he looked at me and says, "I think I did enough."*

***Lizzie:** Wow!*

Chun Rhee: *And for him to say that was like, wow.*

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Lizzie: You've been listening to Sidedoor, a podcast from the Smithsonian with support from PRX.

Lizzie: To learn more about Jhoon Rhee, martial arts or any of Terence's artwork, check out our social channels. You can find us @Sidedoorpod. You can also subscribe to our Newsletter at SI.EDU/Sidedoor. We'll share pictures of some of the objects in exhibition, "Sightlines: Chinatown and Beyond." It's presented by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center, and you can see it at the Smithsonian American Art Museum. It's super cool stuff. If you're in DC, come check it out.

Lizzie: This episode received support from the Asian Pacific American Initiatives Pool, administered by the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center. For help with this episode, we want to thank Sojin Kim, Jimmy Rhee, Chun Rhee, Terence Nicholson, M. Aziz and Rick Lee.

Lizzie: Our podcast is produced by James Morrison, and me, Lizzie Peabody. Executive producer is Ann Conanan. Our editorial team is Jess Sadeq and Sharon Bryant. Fact-checking by Nathalie Boyd. Episode artwork is by Dave Leonard. Transcripts are done by Russell Gragg. Extra support comes from PRX. Our show is mixed by Tarek Fouda. Our theme song and episode music are by Breakmaster Cylinder.

Lizzie: If you have a pitch for us, send us an email at Sidedoor [at] si [dot] edu. And if you want to sponsor our show, please email sponsorship [at] prx [dot] org.

Lizzie: I'm your host, Lizzie Peabody. Thanks for listening.

M. Aziz: *I love the kitschy. There's so many good kitschy moments of martial arts in the '70s. There's a cologne that was also—people of a certain age still remember to this day and I believe it was called High Guy Karate cologne. And so they would advertise it, and they would include self-defense instructions in the packet because they would say, well, you're actually gonna be irresistible. Women are gonna be throwing themselves at you, so you're gonna have to need to know how to defend yourself because you're gonna smell so good. And so I have so many of these good '70s moments.*

Lizzie: *Oh, my God.*

-30-