

A True Fighter

Double ostomate recalls his full-contact lifestyle

By Michael Franco

"Let him die."

That was the advice given to Tom Farrar's mother, Mary, when he entered the world in 1959. Farrar was born with no rectal opening, one kidney and, as he puts it, "A bladder the size of a pea," which burst shortly after his birth, causing peritonitis.

Refusing the advice of the doctors, Mary took Tom home with a temporary colostomy, a glass-tube ileostomy and a dire prognosis. According to Tom's sister

Mary Ellen, who would often stay up all night with him and miss time with friends to care for her little brother, "The doctors told us that Tom wouldn't live more than two years and that he would never walk."

Farrar echoes this memory. "I could always hear my mom crying in the other room when the doctor would say, 'Well, he's doing good now, but he'll never make it to three. Or, he's doing good now, but he'll never make it to five. Or, he's doing good now, but he'll never make it to be an adult.'"

Farrar just celebrated his 54th birthday. Not only did he learn to walk, he rode dirt bikes, mastered several martial arts, worked as a bouncer, bodyguard and stunt man, and is an inspiration to hundreds of students through the various Kung Fu schools he's founded.

"I started thinking Tom was going to live a long time by the time he was six or so," says Mary Ellen, "because he had so much spirit and some kind of inner strength. He always did have so much of that."

Relentless Teasing

One of the most difficult parts of Farrar's early life was the relentless teasing from other children. Not only did he have an ileostomy, but during one of the many surgeries he underwent as a child, doctors attempting



to create a rectal opening botched the process, causing Farrar to become bowel incontinent, which led to additional taunting. At his public grammar school, Farrar told someone he considered a close friend about his condition, in confidence. That person shared the information with the rest of the school, earning Farrar the cruel designation of "pee bag" and leading to bullying so bad that Farrar had to move to a private school where things were slightly less difficult.

An experiment with placing Farrar back in the public school system during fourth grade didn't work. "The tormenting got so bad," he recalls, "that I used to sneak off in the morning, get on my minibike and go riding around. And then one day I forgot my lunch and my mom took it in and the school administrators said, 'Tommy? We thought he was at another school. We haven't seen him in months!'" After Farrar took out his frustration on a bully in a bathroom brawl, the school told his parents that he had mental difficulties and should be removed.

So it was back to the private school, where Tom met one of the early influences in his life, dorm mother Gina Ludlom. "She was the kindest woman," Farrar recalls. "Red-headed little gal. She had such bad arthritis that her fingers were all the way back with huge knuckles and she walked with two canes. But she held down a

dormitory of 25-30 kids like she had a bull whip in one hand and a shotgun in the other. You would get up in the middle of the night to go the bathroom and she could tell by the footsteps who it was and she would say 'What are you doing out of bed Tom?' And she told my mom, 'Let him do whatever he wants to do. Don't hold him back.'"

That was advice that both Tom and his mom heartily heeded. Farrar started taking karate at age six and experimenting with his own stunts, like jumping from the second story of his house into a pile of clothes. He also embraced sports, playing Little League and soccer. The tubes and bags attached to his body never hindered him. He says, "I never did know that I shouldn't be physical. I just did everything."

"I think one of the reasons Tom went into martial arts and did so well in sports was to defend himself and strengthen himself to deal with people challenging him all the time," says Mary Ellen. "But even before that, he was a kid that was like the Eveready® battery. Whenever he was well, he was ready to go, go, go!"

Farrar too describes himself as always having had a "fire in the belly" and being drawn to martial arts as early as he can remember. "I wasn't right in the adult's minds and the kid's minds. Martial arts and sports were the ways I could prove that I was on level ground."

Turning Point

For many people, needing a colostomy can spell the end of life as they know it. For Farrar, when he got a permanent colostomy at age 14, it gave him his life back. An already active child, Farrar now found he could do even more without the worry and embarrassment that comes from incontinence. He says, "I went in for surgery in November, came out in December and by January, I was playing softball. In eighth grade, I was voted 'outstanding school athlete.' I would go out onto the field and just run wind sprints until my stitches were seeping. I was totally radical and just wanted to get back into shape."

Farrar also continued his devotion to martial arts and began teaching the discipline when he turned 18. That's also the time he married the first of three wives, a move he describes as "just dumb." He says the union was

prompted by his medical issues. "I figured if she loves me, I might as well just get married," he says, "because I wouldn't find someone else. Now, three wives later ..." and he trails off, perhaps reflecting on the choice a younger version of himself made before he had the confidence he'd develop later in life.

Confidence in the martial arts scene seems to be something Farrar never lacked, however. Darrel Gooden, who would become Farrar's teaching partner and good friend for over 30 years, reflects on Tom's martial arts path, "Kids can be cruel. Tom is a tough dude, though. In martial arts you have folks that come at it either spiritually, philosophically, or chaotically. Tom is someone in the middle. He had some anger from when he was picked on and bullied, but he made bullies pay for it."

Gooden and Farrar met when Tom was Gooden's student in a Taekwondo class. When it was time for Farrar to take his black belt test, the main instructor found out about his medical condition and banned Tom from participating after he'd been training at that school for two years. Gooden organized all the other black belt instructors to strike and the school's leader recapitulated and allowed Farrar to test. He competed against five instructors and five students, passed and got his belt. He then moved on to Kung Fu, which he took to immediately. Farrar says he gravitated to this style of martial arts because it's the root of all martial arts and has a deep history he finds appealing.

Teaching Martial Art

Farrar opened his first martial arts school in the '80s and, along with Gooden, he's led students through medal-winning performances in many competitions including several in China.

According to Gooden, Farrar is a particularly strong youth instructor. "He's very, very good with kids. That's his specialty. He's watched them grow up and become college students and watched them have ordinary lives. And he's done that several times. He's become like an uncle for many of these kids. He's very personable."

Farrar is an instructor that uses his own life lessons to



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inform his teaching. "I can't stand negativity," he says. "I want kids to be respectful of everyone. And respect and honor are at the core of what I teach. My kids have to do a report for me on the martial moralities like honor, loyalty and trust – all the major things about being a good human." He adds: "Everyone really has to start at zero with an equal chance to be able to show that they can be relevant."

In addition to running the schools, Farrar also filled his adulthood with the same zest for physical activity he exhibited as a child. He worked as a bouncer at night clubs, did body guarding (including a stint as David Carradine's bodyguard), worked as a stunt man doing fight scenes and falls in films and made his own movie entitled "Martial Arts for Everyone," which he describes as the pinnacle of his film career.

More Rewarding

Farrar – who was inducted into the International Martial Arts Hall of Fame in 2006 – today runs the non-profit Mountain Institute for Kung Fu and Tai Chi which he founded in Ojai, CA. Any money the school raises goes toward tuition and uniforms for kids who can't afford them, a noble mission considering that Farrar lives exclusively on a fixed income and Medicare.

Instead of the hard combat styles of Kung Fu, these days Farrar is focusing more on Tai Chi. He says that it's less physically demanding but more physically rewarding than Kung Fu and that it helps him do what he does best, heal, after the surgeries he continues to undergo. "As soon as I can stand when I'm in the hospital," he says, "I start doing the Tai Chi breathing because you can't tense anything. In fact, you relax everything. You concentrate on your movement and your balance and the link you have to the earth." Farrar believes Tai Chi is a particularly good practice for ostomates because it's gentle and teaches body awareness. He says, "What you need to be is aware of your body and know that even though you're not perfect, you're perfect. You might not think you are, but you still have a heart and a soul. You still have the world which is a beautiful place in which to spend a day."

Although Farrar's focus is now on a "softer" form of martial arts, it doesn't mean he's taking it easy: "Even now at my age, I stay up as late as I can because I don't want to waste any more of the day. And I get up at four o'clock in the morning to watch the sunrise and do my Tai Chi, and then I go back to bed. I want as much life as I can get."

For more information about Tom and his Kung Fu school, see: www.mountainkungfu.com. ☺



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