

KIM

Jason Kang

MONTVILLE TOWNSHIP, N.J. – Who says senior citizens can't take dance beyond the visual? Despite his old age, 82-year-old Phil Kim has a continuous passion for tap dancing – A form of dance rooted deep inside his soul.

On Dec. 7, at the Montville Township Youth Center, The Korean- Japanese War veteran, dressed in a funky leather jacket, took his time to share about the extraordinary activity that he's immersed in.

Kim started tap dancing when he was 14 years old, as a means of escaping reality, like a depressed, inner-city teenager, turning to cocaine to escape the pain of his existence.

"While I was growing up, South Korea was a very poor country, under Japanese rule," Kim said. "Although I already had prior interest in tap dancing, I had dreams of becoming a professional tap dancer so that I can make a decent living and end this nightmare."

The South Korea native originally gained interest in tap dancing through his father's friend, who performed tap with his friends every weekend at a local park.

"Every weekend, my friends and I would run to that park to get some ice cream from the ice cream truck, which was right across the park," Kim said. "And one day, I saw my father's friend tap dancing in front of a small crowd. I fell in love with the rhythmic patterns and the fast-paced footwork."

As Kim's passion for tap dancing grew higher, he couldn't resist trying to get a pair of his own tap shoes.

Because of his violent father, Kim couldn't even ask for what he wanted, which was a just a small comic book and pair of tap shoes – The item he really needed to get himself started.

"I wanted them so bad, I would try to sell striped candy in school so I can get

the money to afford them. Those candy were really popular during that time,” Kim said, laughing.

As an adult, Kim learned another form of dance, in hopes of becoming more versatile.

“Around the 1960s, I learned ballet for 2-3 years and taught hundreds of students through private lessons,” Kim said.

Even at this age, Kim tap dances with his students and performs with them at shows, which is what makes his life so remarkable.

Excluding the weekends, Kim has a busy week teaching young adults tap dancing at a beginner’s level.

“I teach classes at the Korean Community Center in Englewood four days a week for an hour and a half ,” Kim said. “Sometimes, I would also casually teach at my church.”

Fatigue is a problem for the senior citizen, but he tries to be helpful as possible and is willing to spend extra minutes for the benefit of his students.

“If my students are constantly doing things wrong or need extra help, I will make little more time for them at the end,” Kim said.

Tap dancing is one of Kim’s daily routines as it became a regular habit just like waking up in the morning, brushing your teeth, and taking a shower.

Even when Kim is not teaching or performing, the unique tapping sounds can be heard repeatedly inside his Montville home, like a pattern.

“I think it’s incredible that my husband who is 82, is healthy and still physically stable enough to use his feet like drums and create such sounds,” said Kim Mi-Ok, the wife of Phil.

Kim has performed at numerous shows and festivals, including one at the Korean Thanksgiving Festival in 2012, which is held annually at Overpeck County Park in Leonia.

Although he failed to draw a large crowd like the young performers who sang and performed modern dance, Kim still considered it to be a huge stage.

“The stage during that festival made me really nervous but I wanted to give a message that

you are never old to give up on what you love,” Kim said.

Tap dancing is an essential form of communicating with the audience, but Kim sometimes feels like he dances just for the sake of performing.

“Our form of dancing is relied on conversational exchange,” Kim said. “You need to tell a story and make meaning with the sounds.”

To improve his way of communicating through tap, Kim spends his free time going to other tap dancing shows to learn from other dancers.

“It’s important for me to listen to other dancers who are taking part in the tap conversation and the response that is given,” Kim said. “I try to apply new twists to my tap dancing and watching others gives me more ideas.”

Unfortunately for Kim, making it to the professional scene was difficult, but the fact that he can still do what he loved for nearly all his life, is what he’s thankful for.

“I don’t know how much longer I will live but I will not part ways with tap dancing until I die,” Kim said, in a bitter tone. “I thank that ice cream truck for sure for making me run a mile to enjoy delicious ice cream and get sucked into the sounds of tap dancing.”