



Esther, her feminine powers evident, also possesses surprising alpha capacities, eventually earning a fourth-degree black belt in Shaolin Kempo karate.



THE INNER WARRIOR

When she decided to reenter the workforce, Esther had been a full-time mom for nearly eight years. During that time, she and Roy economized to afford living on one salary. While she missed the income, she felt strongly that “I didn’t want someone else raising my children.” When Zach turned three, he was already an advanced child and ready for preschool; at four he was in kindergarten, so it seemed a natural time for Esther to look for a job in the Boca Raton area.

With a bachelor’s degree in sociology plus international travel under her belt, she was overqualified for a \$10,000 clerical position, but that was what Whirlpool was offering. She started in 1976, two years before the growing company’s annual revenues surpassed \$2 billion. Esther summarizes the company’s success in Florida due to the enormous population shift South (retirees of every type, as well as many Jewish people): “Neighborhoods were going up all across south Florida, and nearly every home included a brand new Whirlpool appliance.”

As the force behind the family budget and “a numbers guy,” Roy was always supportive of, and sometimes vehement about, Esther’s contributions to the household income. He also did his part, sharing in many of the family duties, including taking responsibility for the kids getting to and from school, whether it was driving them or meeting them when the bus dropped them off at the end of the school day.

With her type-A personality, she never let the symptoms of stress (headaches, nausea, diarrhea, stomach aches) interfere with work.

For the next twelve years Esther worked for Whirlpool, moving from the clerical pool to advertising, then to the accounting offices in Deerfield Beach, where her salary was doubled. But the workplace stress was hardly worth it. She had begun suffering from intestinal and digestive issues that now were chronic. With her type-A personality, she never let the symptoms of stress (headaches, nausea, diarrhea, stomach aches) interfere with work. But more than once

when she brought her children to the doctor, the physician took one look at Esther and said, “Your child has a minor issue, but do you realize that you are seriously sick? You the one who needs to see a doctor!”

By this time she had a solid history of denying her symptoms. When Zach was a nursing baby, Esther took Gina to school, came home and ignored the fever burning in her body until she was immobilized with a 105-degree temperature. Roy happened to come home for lunch that day and called the doctor for advice on lowering her fever.

“Try to stand her up under a shower of lukewarm water,” the physician advised. “If you can’t do that, rub her down with alcohol. If you can’t bring her temperature down, you’d better rush her to the hospital.” After five excruciating hours of Roy attempting to bring down the fever, Esther’s body began to cool down, and she began to improve.

One ongoing health issue during this time was a cycle of becoming pregnant and miscarrying. She tried various birth-control methods, including the copper intrauterine device, or IUD, but developed swelling, infections, pain, and uterine fibroids. In 1983, at the age of 40, she was hospitalized to have both an appendectomy and a hysterectomy.

That year, Esther’s stepfather, Boris, died. At his funeral, all agreed that he had treated Esther’s mother with respect and loving kindness. Charlotte was now a widow, and Esther was relentless in working to convincing, persuade her mother to come south and live in an apartment near her home in Boca. Finally, mother and daughter were reunited for the final chapter of Charlotte’s life.

Esther persisted in working toward a promotion as the company mushroomed, announcing net sales of \$4 billion in 1984, its seventy-fifth year of making home appliances. Whirlpool was hiring and promoting managers right and left, and Esther was management material—that much was evident to anyone who had observed her at work. But despite enjoying both a clerical workforce

Whirlpool was hiring and promoting managers right and left, and Esther was management material....

and a customer base that was nearly completely female, Whirlpool did not put women in leadership positions.

She watched the company usher younger and less-qualified male coworkers into executive MBA school, which was offered in the evenings and weekends and included partial or full company scholarships. She was bold enough to ask her supervisor to recommend her for it. But as Esther remembers it, her supervisor's attitude was: "I'm not going to be the first one to have a female manager."

Instead, she was assigned as warehouse clerk for the Florida sales division, following a management decision to move much of the Florida workforce up to Atlanta as a strategy aimed at averting a possible hostile takeover.

Her last job review, dated December 22, 1986, affirms Esther's situation—and her feelings about it—in her final weeks with the company.

"Esther's absentee rate is at 2.7 percent which is below the corporate goal of 3 percent. She is very punctual and always ready to start work on time. The transfer to position of warehouse clerk has been quite an adjustment for Esther. She is a very intelligent person and is basically overqualified for this position, which at times is a little frustrating for Esther; however, she is doing a good job in dealing with this problem. She continues to express a desire for a management role with Whirlpool. . . ."

Esther became RIF (reduction in workforce), otherwise known as laid off. She left behind the equity she had built within the company but took with her the toll it had taken on her body and psyche. She found work else-

where, but her accounting practices—refusing to cook the books—were not acceptable to the firm, so her name was quickly and quietly removed from that payroll as well.

When they dropped Zach off at Carnegie Mellon, Esther had fewer daily chores, but at the same time she felt an increased pressure to work since there were two college tuitions to pay. She placed a "Seeking Work" ad in the local paper, listing her degree and credentials and offering to do anything, including clean houses. Someone who knew her from synagogue recommended her to a local physician who was looking for someone to help with his children. The doctor's wife had recently died of cancer, and although there was a housekeeper on staff, he hired Esther to cook and to safely drive his children to and from school.

While the "Mom Duty" job offered a relaxed and informal work environment and her salary was generous, Esther continued to lose weight. Her level of inner stress, already high, was intensified by her mother's cancer diagnosis and worsening condition over the ensuing four years.

**A new word surfaced:
"anorexia."**

Seeking healing for her inexplicable ailment (and in typical type-A overachiever fashion), Esther had enrolled herself in martial arts classes and was seeing a mental-health counselor as well, but neither therapies had stopped the weight loss. She was so obsessed by the idea of gaining weight that often all she ate was a tiny serving of oatmeal and a small salad. Esther shrunk to 67 pounds, which even at 5'1" is emaciated.

What happens to one member of a family happens to all members, and so it was that Roy also sought help in a therapist's office. A new word surfaced: "anorexia."

For Roy it was a shorthand way of referring to Esther's symptoms: unhealthy weight loss, obsession with caloric intake, and fear of weight gain. When Roy's therapist learned that Esther wasn't being weighed regularly to document her weight loss, his response carried an urgency and element of alarm. Expanding his own search for answers, Roy found the Renfrew Center in Coconut Creek, Florida, and began attending group meetings for people whose lives are affected by anorexia.

At last Roy convinced Esther to join him in one of the Renfrew meetings. What happened that day took them all by surprise. A clinical psychologist took Esther by the hand and said, "Esther, you look like someone who's in kidney failure; you're going to die if you don't change this! Starting today."

It was the wakeup call she needed. "I don't intend to die," she told Roy that day.

At Roy's urging, she checked herself into the Renfrew Center for a nine-week voluntary evaluation and treatment. Compassionate staff members explained that Esther's heart had shriveled to an unhealthy size, and her kidneys were ceasing to function. They made sure that she ingested daily supplements and insisted that she take in least 250 calories a day, which, as Esther attests, "was more than I was used to taking in."

The camaraderie was eerie. "We could see that we all did the same things to control our eating," Esther says. "Some women wouldn't eat anything except broccoli. It was so obvious that we had the same issues; it was like we all came from the same planet."

At the end of the nine weeks of treatment, she had slowly—very slowly—begun to gain weight. But once she was home, she felt the same pressure to add to the family budget, and she felt that her husband wanted her back at work as soon as possible. The following month, she announced: "I'll go look for a job."

John Fritz's Shaolin Kempo Karate classes at Fred Vallari's studio were the perfect fit for young Zach when, at age eight, his parents sent him for martial-arts training. They felt it had the potential to help a person of any age develop self-confidence, calming practices, and inner qualities that behoove general personal development.

"Zach was good," Esther bragged, "and he was dedicated. In that period between age thirteen and sixteen, many young men drop out after getting their green belt or after getting their brown belt. But Zach stuck with it."

The belts are actually sashes. Beginning students wear white sashes, and ten belts stand in between the white belt and the first-degree black belt. "To advance to the second belt, which is yellow, one must effectively demonstrate several different hand strikes, kicks, the eight-point blocking system, and two self defense combinations. Students were also required to read *The Martial Arts and Real Life* by Fred Villari.



A brown belt at the age of eleven, Zach was a fearless "karate kid."

"There are three elements," Esther says, "in the study of the self-defense arts: fighting, forms, and combinations. Fighting will use kicks and certain elements. Forms, in broad terms, are where you do an enactment of how you would fight a number of people, and it expresses itself almost like a dance but with hard strikes. Then you have combinations. Combinations are four elements: a block, a strike, a takedown, and a completion—which means you kill the person. You block his strike, you strike back, and then you finish him. And there are over a hundred combinations in the system."

Zach always won in the form but might loose to a larger opponent

in the fight. Nevertheless, he kept at it. When he was eleven years old, he earned a brown belt, and karate had become second nature to him. It was a natural step when one day the teacher was late, and Zach stepped forward and began teaching the class. On Zach's first day at Saint Andrew's, he found himself being bullied—grabbed by head to be precise—by a student who obviously hadn't a clue that he was picking on a boy who was a serious martial-arts student and a third-degree brown belt. Instinctively, Zach dropped the boy to the floor before the kid knew what was happening.



Top Left: A black belt at the age of thirteen, Zach was fifteen in this photo.

Top Right: Increasing in skill, a serious student can earn more advanced belts: yellow, orange, purple, blue, blue stripe, green, green stripe, up to black. Tournaments involve both fighting and form, with points awarded for maneuvers, and in fighting, a two-point spread decides the winner.



Left: Zach, at fifteen, demonstrates a perfect side blade kick.



Gina and Zach in 1988.

Martial-arts training involves a great deal of self-restraint, and Zach put up with constant teasing and heckling from two boys who also were friendly with him—until one day he had had enough.

As Esther tells it, “One day when they were bullying him, all the self-control went away. He looked down the hall and didn’t see anyone else, so he grabbed those kids and slammed one of them into the wall and the other into the blackboard. And that was the end of that. All the teasing ended. Later, I heard from the teachers that they were glad these boys had been dealt with.”

“He would walk off with trophies,”

Esther laughs, “and he hadn’t even done anything. Because he had nobody else to compete against except grown men.” Esther began taking private tai chi lessons while Zach was in karate, then met “Master Fritz” when he was working with Zach and asked him to become her tai chi instructor.

“I was a little scared of him because he was an advanced black belt, but there was something gentle about him,” she said. She was forty-three years old, five feet one inch tall, struggling with anorexia, and amid leaving the

job at Whirlpool that had taxed her body, mind, and soul. But within her chest beat the heart of a fighter. She enjoyed the feeling of moving her body in the form of tai chi, the discipline of it. It wasn’t long before he suggested she move into karate, the main form John Fritz was teaching.

She began to devote her life to karate, despite the fact that she had to work harder than just about everybody else. In addition to classes, she also dedicated herself to private instruction with Master Fritz. “In my wildest dreams as a young girl, I never would have thought that I would want to fight,” she confesses. “But I really had a good time.”

John Fritz began to call Esther “my secret weapon” because he saw in her a river of raw power. Untapped resources. At the same time he observed that something else was going on with his star female student. She was thin and continued to lose weight. Something was terribly out of



Top: Esther (right) makes a side-blade kick during a competition. “I’m not supposed to hurt her,” Esther explains.

Bottom: Esther, proudly displaying a trophy she had just won in a 1988 karate fighting competition.

John Fritz began to call Esther “my secret weapon” because he saw in her a river of raw power.

balance. John describes the Esther he met as “a very intelligent, sensitive person who was very anxious. She was overstimulated by all the dynamics going on in her life. Sometimes she would have panic attacks while driving her car, and she would call for Roy to come get her.”

As it turned out, going to see John had such an immediate peaceful impact on Esther that the panic she had long experienced while driving a car dissipated. She made the drive herself from her home in Boca to his studio in Wellington: a huge hurdle that she never again had to cross.

While advancing up the ranks to tenth-degree black belt and master instructor of Shaolin Kempo Karate, John cofounded and for five years served as director of the Mind-Body Institute of Jupiter Medical Center. There he focused on psychoimmunology: how the nervous system affects hormones and the immune system. In short, it is the study of how a person’s emotions affect the vitality of the cells, which regulate the systems.

Esther fit the description of a type with which he was already familiar: people with a predisposition for information overload who contract painful physical or emotional symptoms and who are hypersensitive to the world around them.

Apparently hypersensitivity in the nervous system is clinically measureable. Making a high-resolution medical scan of the skin of the upper arm or

inner upper arm will allow technicians to count the number of nerve endings per square inch. As Master Fritz explains it, for someone on the low side—say, 17,000—an explosion could go off nearby, and they’d have a relatively mild response.

People like Esther will have as many as 40,000 nerve endings per square inch in the measured area. They are literally processing three times more information neurologically than people who score on the low side of this test. They are highly sensitive to how other people feel and what is going on



Left: Esther with the only other woman who had just earned a black belt in the Shaolin karate class, December 15, 1990.

Above: Esther with the Shaolin karate black-belt class; she assumes that the only reason her teacher, Master Fritz, is not in the photograph is because he was taking it.

in a room; they connect the emotional dots faster than most people, but the whole business is wildly overstimulating. “There is more going on than they have strategies for responding, and they conclude that something is wrong with them,” Master Fritz says.

**Esther began to learn
that life is not about
what happens to you;
it’s about what you
do next.**

Esther began to learn that life is not about what happens to you; it’s about what you do next. She credits martial arts for helping her focus on moving toward a solution when there is chaos, toward creating a safe situation when there is danger.

Over time, the practice of Zen warrior training yielded benefits that took root in Esther’s work and family life. But not without a price. As with any dedicated pursuit, there was some pain and a mild injury from time to time, including the loss of a tooth. “I struck at my opponent, who was a very large man, but when he came back at me, I moved in too soon, and my face came in contact with his foot, which knocked loose one of my teeth, which got infected and had to be pulled.”

But she learned her lessons well and continued to triumph over larger and stronger opponents. “Sparring with larger opponents or many opponents calls for a willingness to flow like water rather than meet force with force,” Master Fritz says. “Esther—being so small—was the ideal candidate.” He decided it was time for Esther to learn the sword.

The sword, in this case, was an oak dowel. As it is used in martial arts, it forces interest in the present moment. John Fritz teaches that the present is “a sanctuary where the future and the past are in the background. The sword is the instrument that pierces illusion. If a person isn’t sure of their power, he can never use the sword with true strength. He cannot hit a bag hard with it; something is holding him back. But if you put the stick in his hand and give him a situation where he must help a friend in need, his limitations become obsolete.”

For Esther, the segue between powerlessness and powerful happened in class one day when she arrived for practice and Master Fritz announced: “Esther, today you learn the sword.”

“The sword? Really?”

“Watch. Look. Feel.” Moving into the seven-star stance—samurai facing a samurai—he generated a fullness of presence in body, in mind, and in spirit that was apparent to the eye. Gliding toward the bag and striking it soundly with the dowel, he turned to Esther:

“What did you see?”

She wasn’t sure, but she wanted to try it. She was instructed to visualize a situation in which a friend was in danger and needed help, then strike the bag with everything she could. Moving into the stance, she glided forward and hit the bag. It was, as John Fritz described it, “not an authoritative thing but a testing of the waters.”

And so he challenged her: “Was that true? Did you help out that friend in a way that there was no doubt in your mind? Now, do it again.”

Her eyes lit up.

“You could see her energy expand,” John recalled. “She moved three steps to the bag, and she hit it with such a thump that the vibration and the sound of it was unmistakable: she had experienced an instant recognition that a lot more was possible for her than she had ever considered before.”

Her focus was so apparent and her progress so persistent that other people working in the room would turn and watch her “because they sensed this power emerging from an internal source,” John says.



Three white stripes on the sash, evidence of her third-degree black belt, as Esther runs through martial arts poses in 1997. She eventually earned fourth-degree dan status.

After that, Esther would sometimes walk into the studio and ask: “Is today a stick day?”

John would ask: “Would today be better served if it was a stick day?”

“Yes, it would,” she’d answer.

He explains, “I’d put the stick in her hand, watch her walk toward the bag, watch her sense of presence, and you could see that the stress or difficulty she was bearing would unplug. You could see that she was changing the story of that day, of that moment, and plugging it into a desirable outcome. It’s an active state of meditation. It boosts the immune response; it takes stress and turns it into vitality.”

After Esther bested all the women in the studio, she was assigned to join a group of male students.

After Esther bested all the women in the studio, she was assigned to join a group of male students. Faced with opponents who were a great deal stronger and a foot taller, she decided to take advantage of the strengths she naturally possessed: she was a woman, she was fast, and martial arts afforded ways to maximize being small. She had no problem taking full advantage of being a woman, adopting a

motto: “smile, act cute, and give the first punch.” It gave her a fighting chance at the outset, but in the end she was forced to use everything she could think of. Such as the time she was competing against a black belt. “He was a big guy, about two hundred fifty pounds. At one point, he got ahold of me and

was holding me up in the air, so I did a body roll in midair and smacked the back of my head against the front of his head—and I decked him.”

She earned the name “Thumper” from Master Fritz because she could execute a back kick that would disable the largest opponent. During one practice session when she knew her practice partner was not wearing a protective groin cup, she was careful to avoid that area—but she did deliver an effective kick to a nearby nerve in the leg that instantly dropped him to his knees.

While studying martial arts, Esther was also working full-time and taking care of her mother. Charlotte had returned home from a family wedding in 1989 in great physical pain, and subsequent tests showed full-blown colon cancer, with cancerous cells raging in the upper part of the colon. Esther and Roy were thrown into the world of health-care advocates, attempting to educate themselves on this particular cancer and make informed but timely decisions on Charlotte’s treatment. Charlotte reacted badly to anesthesia when they attempted to perform surgery, and she developed infections and a great deal of pain and other complications. It was decision time. She was seventy years old. She had watched her husband live through the ordeal of chemotherapy for liver cancer, only to die too young, anyway.

The decision was made to forego chemotherapy and to move Charlotte to Esther and Roy’s house in Boca so that Esther could be nearby and help her. Three years later Esther and Roy were beyond exhausted from working regular jobs and caring for Charlotte on their so-called free time. She was a good patient, and grateful for their care, but she had a great deal of fear about dying. Everyone was relieved when it was time to call in hospice.



Zach, Roy, Gina, and Gina's fiancé, James Mowka, possibly in 1992, ("Gina's in good spirits, so she couldn't have been working on her doctorate here," Esther says.)

For the most part they had told Zach and Gina to stay away as the situation was too painful, too unpredictable. But near the end, Esther called Zach and said, "She isn't doing well. Maybe you should come down." When Zach arrived, he took one look at Esther and said, "Mom! You look horrible! Go to bed. I'll sit up with Grandma."

The early 1990s included important, and painful, markers for the Levow family involving achievement, loss, and gain. Esther was 81 pounds when she earned her first black belt on December 15, 1990; on February 10, 1992, when her mother died, Esther had dropped back to 67 pounds; by the time she was tested for her third-degree black belt, she was between 90 and 100 pounds. Her eating patterns, or lack of them, were something that she

tackled alone and in sessions with Master Fritz, who had continued working mind-body healing therapies with Esther while she was in the Renfrew Center.

**Esther was 81 pounds
when she earned her
first black belt on
December 15, 1990....**

In the two decades since her mother died, Esther has maintained her weight of about 100 pounds since 1994—but with great care.

"If I see someone who is extremely thin who is binge eating, I know what she's going through, and I have a gut-wrenching reaction to that. I can't be in a situation with a woman who is very sick with anorexia. It can't even be in that space. If you're anorexic, you don't realize that being too thin is deadly. I lived my life on the scale before I got over it. People can trigger it by commenting that you look good because you lost weight. There are triggers that could influence my behavior as far as food goes, and I try very hard to avoid those triggers. For instance, I don't weigh on a scale—ever. Weight is always on my mind. I am very careful with my eating. If you're anorexic, you have that number in your head and that's it: if you get one pound over, you are triggered. It doesn't go away. Ever."



Far Left: Already a third-degree black belt, Esther competed in regional tournaments such as this one in 2000.

Above Left: Special gear was required for fighting competitions, as Esther shows in this 2000 event.

Above Right: Esther's teacher, Master John Fritz, with Grandmaster Fred Volare, and Master Mark Pearson at a competition in 2000. In the early days, Fritz often taught at Volare studios.