

My name is Darius Andaya, an ITF 5th Dan Black Belt (C-5-151), Father and Coach of Darryl Andaya, 20 years old, 1st Dan C-1-7237), a young man with Down Syndrome (DS), a World Champion in Adaptive Taekwon-Do or Special Needs Taekwon-Do, and recently, a credited Illustrator for the book, “ I, Too, Can Be Special!”.

Background

Darryl started taekwondo in 2008. With natural flexibility common to DS kids, Taekwon-Do seemed like the perfect sport for him because he can kick really high. It does take him much longer to memorize patterns, as well as take in the finer details of each technique, but with patience and perseverance, on both student and instructor, Darryl has proven, time and again, that people with DS can learn and excel. The fact that other students would get promoted faster than him did not bother him one bit. While others got promoted to Black Belt in 4 to 5 years, Darryl got his after almost 10 years.



Darryl kept training with no complaints. When it was time to train, he trained seriously. He enjoys performing in front of people which helps him with his patterns, and he likes pretend fighting which helps him with sparring. There was one time he participated at a tournament and lost. He cried. When asked why he was crying, he said, he just wants to do it again. He wasn't crying because of the loss, he was crying because he didn't get to perform again. This was an eye opener for me. Winning is not everything for him. He just wants to belong and be a part of something. Here are links of Darryl in training: <https://youtu.be/RmDeWqdZ4kE> and <https://youtu.be/XjRpuqrdqrc>



Darryl, The Champion

After winning the 2019 George Klukas Award for Outstanding Achievements from the Down Syndrome Resource Foundation (DSRF)¹, Burnaby, Darryl went to New Zealand to represent Canada at the 1st International Special Needs Taekwon-do Games.

At the games, Darryl easily became a crowd favourite as they soon started chanting Canada every time he stepped on the mats. Darryl came back home with a gold medal for Patterns, a gold together with his Coach for Mixed abilities where we demonstrated a prearranged sparring routine, a silver for PowerBreaking and a bronze medal for High Jumping Kick

despite being 2 feet shorter than the tallest opponent. For Team Canada, despite being the only delegate, Darryl also accepted the Fourth Place Award for Best Country. Here's a link regarding his success at the games. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfuC4R5g7u8>.

Other instructors from different countries complemented Darryl for showing them all the possibilities that they can expect from their own students. Where it was believed that DS kids don't jump, Darryl just finished his performance with a Spinning flying Turning Kick. Where

¹ The Down Syndrome Resource Foundation (DSRF) is an organization dedicated to empowering individuals with Down Syndrome to reach their full potential by pioneering and providing educational programs and services, disseminating information, and changing attitudes. They offer a variety of programs including Speech Therapy, Occupational Therapy, Reading and Math Instruction and ITF Taekwon-Do, to name a few.

they were once happy that a student can memorize a pattern, they now know that Special Needs students can perform it as well as mainstream students can.

Darryl, the Instructor

Upon his return, Darryl came back to continue his work with as a Greeter/Doorman at Elections Canada as well as his role as an assistant instructor at DSA Royal International Taekwon-Do where he enjoys teaching the Taekwon-Do Kids class (4-6 years old) as well as his peers with Special Needs at DSRF. Here is a link to DSRF's Profile on Darryl: <https://youtu.be/OpzDeIvbf7U>.

Darryl loves his new role as an Assistant Instructor. He is quick to point out mistakes in techniques as well as breeches in protocols that younger and newer students sometimes do. He likes holding target pads for his students and challenges them to improve by showing them how he executes techniques with speed and power. Since he still finds it difficult to speak, he usually shows what he means through demonstrations.



Darryl's normal routine in class usually starts with leading the warm up and fundamental movements. Then while the head instructor teaches, Darryl goes around and check each student's techniques. At DSRF, he holds pads when we are practicing sparring techniques or light sparring. At tournaments, while he mostly serves as umpire to Little Dragon elimination matches (under the guidance of the main umpire, he also enjoys announcing the winners, as the Jury President's assistant, an unofficial role we created for him for our school tournaments. Here is a link of Darryl at one of his classes: <https://youtu.be/M8g9m4PEKys>

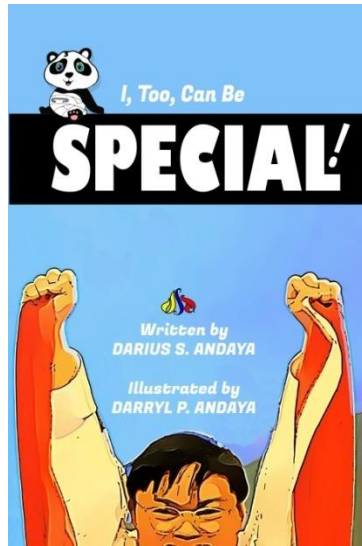


Darryl, the Illustrator

Darryl was attending his Gateway to Adulthood program² when the COVID19 pandemic hit. This forced him to stay at home and do all his studies and training online. It was hard on him since he was used to going out and training at our studio as well as participating at his community inclusion programs. Two years before this happened, I started a poem for Darryl which I meant to dedicate to him on his 18th birthday. However, life happened and 2 years later, it remained unfinished. When the pandemic hit and our office and Taekwon-Do school closed, I asked Darryl if he wanted to draw pictures. He did and the rest became history. It only took him 3 days to draw all the characters. It took me longer, to color them and do the background art. He was so focused, we had to ask him to rest a little bit from time to time.

A few months later in time for his 20th birthday, the book "I, Too Can Be Special!" was published and launched to the public through social media.

² The Gateway to Adulthood program of the Vancouver School Board provides students opportunities to participate in unpaid work experience as well as explore social and recreational connections in the community. They provide coaching and supervision during work experience, support the transition to paid employment, and facilitate community connections.



I, Too Can Be Special!

The book is a story/poem of Darryl's life experiences as a person with disabilities. Sample: <https://youtu.be/fu8z8r9Sdt4>. As he cannot personally communicate his thoughts, I tried to communicate his thoughts for him, the way his mom and I understood them when he tries to communicate with us. I believe these are the words he wants to say to the world and we hope that the world will listen to the thousands of people like him, who only wants a chance, to show what they could do, given opportunities.

Although, it is unfortunate that social distancing was preventing us from fully launching this wonderful book but we hope that with the support of our Taekwon-Do community, we can get the word out and let the world be inspired by his story.

For those, interested the book is available on

- Paperback and E-Book: Amazon Kindle: <https://amzn.to/2Ou58MA>
- Hard Bound lulu.com <https://bit.ly/396O60A>
- Or email Darius at dsataekwondo@gmail.com

CONCLUSION

Darryl's story is by no means over. In fact, it has barely begun. He continues to be highly motivated to learn new things. He just recently learned how to ride a bike and despite all the falls and all the tears, he continues to get up and ride again. Everytime he falls, he would say, "I don't like biking." But after only a few days, I would ask him if he wants to ride again and he would always say yes.

Kids like Darryl, pardon me, **Men** like Darryl never say no to 'being a part of something'. He welcomes opportunities and will try anything out at least once. Our hope is that everyone who reads this article, especially our ITF Taekwon-Do decision makers, will be as motivated as he is in making all aspects of ITF Taekwon-Do, competitions in particular, be available to all, as our founder, General Choi, always meant it to be. Give Special Needs Taekwon-Do a stage to show their abilities. Their love which is always on their sleeves, will overwhelm you. Their perseverance will lift your spirits and their innocence will give you a better view of the world.

To all parents, our hope is that we have inspired you to never give up. Continue searching for what make your kids special. As we said on the book, these kids were born to stand out. The trick is on finding his/her own stage. Once there, let the spotlight shine as brightly as it can.

Yours in Taekwon-Do

Darius Andaya
Proud Instructor and even PROUDER Dad