

PROFESSIONS Warrior educator

by Jim Distasio

"In order await disorder; in tranquillity await the clamorous. This is the way to control the mind."

So says Sun-Tzu, an oft-quoted fourth-century-B.C. Chinese military general and philosopher, in his collection of writings, "The Art of War." During the 1970s, Sun-Tzu's work, which dealt with strategies on the battlefield, grew in popularity in the United States after it was discovered that his eerily prescient thoughts on warfare could be applied to modern-day business.

Soon everybody from day traders to Hollywood agents were speaking of "implementing an incendiary attack," "employing spies" and learning to move armies "like thunder." But many of them were missing Sun-Tzu's point: Business, like warfare, should be conducted with respect and honor; to do otherwise is a betrayal of self.

For people like Dr. Mark Frigo, a Chicago-based business consultant and educator, respect and honor is more than just an ancient philosophy, it's a way of life. Frigo is director of the Center for Strategy, Execution and Valuation in the Kellstadt Graduate School of Business at DePaul University, where he teaches classes and is a leading expert in strategy design and execution for major corporations.

But Frigo is more than just another business professor by day, corporate consultant to Fortune 500 companies by night. He's something of a warrior himself ... literally.

Frigo is a Yon-Dan, or a fourth-degree black belt, in Shotokan karate, which strives to turn physical techniques into pure expressions of the mind's intentions. He began his martial arts studies more than 35 years ago as a way to achieve peace, balance and discipline in his life.

"The training of mind, body and spirit together was so appealing to me," Frigo says.

In fact, Frigo says his martial arts studies have shaped his life nearly as much as his Italian heritage.

Raised in the Pullman neighborhood on the South Side of Chicago, Frigo, along with his twin brother, were the oldest of five children born to Edna Santi and Reno "Lefty" Frigo, who were first-generation Italian Americans. Frigo's grandparents had immigrated to America in the 1920s; his mother's family from Tuscany, his father's from the Veneto province near Cesuna in the Dolomite Mountains of northern Italy.

"I grew up in a very Italian environment," Frigo says. "I guess you could say I had a 'typical' Italian upbringing."

The Frigos lived next door to their grandparents for many years, and the children spent much



DePaul professor and fourth-degree black belt Mark Frigo has been molded both by Eastern philosophy and his Italian upbringing.

of their formative years with their nonnas, learning how to make polenta, ravioli and gnocchi. "As a child, I assumed all grandparents lived next door," Frigo says.

But his parents and grandparents did more than just pass a few recipes onto the children. They also instilled in them the notion of education as a revered and respected institution.

Over the years, the Frigo children took full advantage of every scholastic opportunity that came their way. Frigo attended the University of Illinois, where he received his bachelor's degree in accountancy. He feverishly continued his studies, earning a master's degree in business administration and a Ph.D. in economics and econometrics from Northern Illinois University. He completed post-graduate studies in economics and econometrics at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University and became both a Certified Public Accountant (CPA) in the state of Illinois and a Certified Management Accountant.

"I learned from my parents and grandparents the work ethic and philosophy of 'going all the way,'" Frigo says. "My parents never went to college, and were so proud of their children. My twin

brother and I were the first in our family to go to college. My younger brother, Ron, was the first Italian American from Illinois to attend the U.S. Naval Academy at Annapolis."

In between degrees, Frigo began an illustrious career in corporate accounting and finance. After working for a few years on mergers and acquisitions, he became a management consultant at KPMG, where he helped clients design and execute strategies to improve their bottom line and overall value.

After completing his doctorate, Frigo intended to return to management consulting, a field he was rapidly making a name for himself in. But the love of learning was too strong, and Frigo instead entered academia full time in 1980 as a professor in the School of Accountancy at DePaul.

Teaching at DePaul is the fulfillment of a lifelong dream for Frigo, who, in his younger days, used to walk past the school and look upon it in awe. The school was quintessentially Chicago, where roughly one-third of its student body is made up of first-generation college students. "To be a senior professor and a center director there is truly the greatest honor," Frigo says.

While at DePaul, Frigo has remained a leading expert in strategy design and execution, and is the author of five books and more than 60 articles. With Joel Litman, Frigo has pioneered "Return Driven Strategy," an innovative framework for strategic analysis that credibly links business performance and business value. The duo's work was recently published by the Harvard Business Review, and a book on the subject is forthcoming.

While Frigo is a much-sought-after consultant to board of directors and executives, he spends most of his time with his MBA students. But he says consulting CEOs and corporate executives strengthens his teaching. "You have to walk the walk," he says. "My students need to know I'm in the boardroom, making an impact in business."

Frigo even finds a way to weave karate into his lesson plans. Although he stops short of breaking boards in the classroom, he uses the philosophy of actor/martial artist Bruce Lee to introduce his students to everything from proper business ethics to performance measurement.

"When Bruce Lee was asked 'what is the best martial art?' he responded, 'Whatever martial art works best in a given situation.' He meant 'be flexible, be like water,'" Frigo says. "I tell my students that Bruce Lee would've been a great business strategist and financial analyst. You have to use whatever works best in a given situation and with the right intention. One size does not always fit all."