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1st Dan Black Belt
Journey to a Black Belt

When I was small, I was obsessed with ninjas and fighters like Bruce Lee. I remember I always watched them on TV and went to my room to go “practice” all of my karate moves. I even went and got one of my mom’s black belts and tie it around my waist to pretend I was a black belt. For a long time I wanted to do Karate but never really had the patience or attention span being a seven year old kid. My dad finally took me around to different rec centers to have me participate in karate classes that they offered. Most of them were just kids running around jumping over stuff and learning to yell and make a mean face. At the time, I thought that was awesome. My dad didn’t really like the style of teaching they were using so he continued to look for a class when he found out that some family friends ran a karate class at the Belle Creek Rec Center. When I walked into the gym for the first time, I was immediately in awe because at the front of the class there was this huge, tall guy with a blue gee and a black belt who I immediately thought was Bruce Lee until he ran over to introduce himself as Bryant Pham.

My first few weeks of class, were really fun as things usually are when they’re new. But as time went on I got frustrated because it seemed like I was learning the same thing over and over again. A few months in my dad had to drag me to Karate class sometimes because I was too lazy. It seemed like there were too big time intervals between testing for the belts so I would never get my black belt. I seriously considered quitting around my purple or green belt range but my dad kept reminding me that there were people in class like On Hien, Bryant, Kelly, and Ms. Allison who had given three hours of their life every week to help me improve and grow and to throw that all away would just mean that they were wrong to invest their efforts in me. All the way up to my brown belt, I had a lot of conflicting thoughts and emotions about figuring out exactly what I was going to karate for and what was my goal. I didn’t know whether I did it to compete with my sister, or to impress On Hien, or to become like Bryant. After a lot of thinking and fighting with my parents, they helped me come to the conclusion that Karate shouldn’t be for anyone else but myself. If I was going to go every day and work for someone else, I would hate it and I might as well quit. This idea translated into my black belt training as well. At Karate and before the classes, my dad would ask me or I would ask myself, what can I get out of today’s lesson? As I trained harder with my body for the black belt test and it became muscle memory, the lesson’s, challenges, and barriers became more mental than physical. On Hien ask me if I was a leader. He would ask both me and my sister if we worked well with others and people lower belt than us. I realized that this was because the end goal of Karate for me and the expectation from my teachers around me wasn’t that I just became a good black belt, it was so that I could become a good teacher.

Knowing this, after I passed my black belt test, I understand why On Hien pushed so hard on basic fundamentals not just so that we can learn the techniques but also so that we can pass them on to another student without giving them the wrong information. With this new goal in mind my black belt was just the beginning of something else for me. The journey there was to prepare my body, learn the techniques to the best of my ability, and work hard so that my instructors were proud. However, the journey from a black belt to an instructor will be to unravel my bad habits and strive to do what all my instructors did for me which is to help someone else on their journey to black belt and whatever they aspired to be afterwards.

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