

Colin McCorkle: Third Degree Black Belt Journey.

After receiving my second degree black belt in December of 2023, I wrote an updated journey statement about my time as a first degree that emphasized a desire at that time for continued growth and learning, but also talked about the nerves surrounding the “what is next?” after receiving a belt promotion. In the end, the growth and the learning never ended, and what is next became clear to me. After receiving another promotion, I have another stripe on my belt, I see as I tie my belt, that it is becoming slightly tattered where the knot rubs against itself, and I see my name embroidered on the belt in golden lettering. These not only serve as reminders of the dedication and hard work put into earning this promotion, but as a reminder of what is still to come.

My teacher and mentor, Grand Master Hien Pham, owns several belts, some of which look brand new, yet he almost always wears a black belt that at first glance does not even look black. It has become faded and looks as if it is turning back into a white belt from the decades of work he has put into his journey. To me, this represents a future I hope to one day achieve. I hope to one day say that my belt is not black, not because I never achieved this rank, but because I gave everything I had while in this rank. I hope to say that I put many years of tying and untying my belt before and after classes into my journey, that I worked hard, physically and mentally every time I had my black belt around my waist, and that I fully embraced every challenge, lesson, and moment of growth that came with it.

None of the belts that Grand Master Pham wears display his rank. As an avid competitor in martial arts tournaments across the state of Colorado, I have seen several high ranking individuals of different titles, and they are all equipped with belts with stripes up and down one or sometimes both sides, but not my teacher's. To me, this is not a stylistic choice, instead, it shows humility. He does not force people to listen to him based on the amount of stripes on his belt. Instead, people choose to listen to him because of the quality of his teachings, not only within the martial arts, but also those to do with people's lives. A feat and level of humility I can only hope to achieve one day.

I have learned that my martial arts journey, while new ranks are amazing goals and even better milestones, should not have to do with what I display around my waist. Instead, my journey has become about the quality and in depth explanation of material I am learning, the effort that I can put in each night, for myself and our students, the positive changes that have become apparent in my day to day life that I have learned from martial arts, and what I can give back to my ASKA family. Each time I am in class, I am concerned with not only what I can learn, but what I can give back to our students to help them along their journey. No two journeys will look the same, so instead I can give every class my all in order to support our students.

I truly owe all my thanks to Grand Master Hien Pham and every other ASKA instructor that has worked with me throughout the years. I also owe it to our students, not only do I try to share as much as I can with them, but it is important for them to know that I have learned so much from them. They make me better every single class by asking questions that are sometimes even challenging to me. I recognize that my journey is far from over and look forward to what I can continue to learn from my instructors and students, because although I may be an instructor now, there is so much I can learn from those who came before me.