



Tiana Pham

1st Degree black belt

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When I first started martial arts at the age of 7, it was because my mom signed me up for the class at the Southwest YMCA. I went along with it because I thought I had to. Over the years, I always quit for the school year and came back during the summer when my mom forced me to go again. It was a continuous cycle until I hit middle school and decided if my mom is just going to force me to go again and again, I might as well stay and see how far I get. But I never really imagined earning my first degree black belt.

While I didn't enjoy martial arts as a kid, I learned to like it over the years. It helped that my instructors made it enjoyable and never gave up on me even though I gave up on them (multiple times I might add). They've stayed – and still stay – with me throughout my journey. Arguably, Master Joe, Scott, Chris, Kay, and Jim are the reasons why I stuck with Tae Kwon Do at all. Chris, Scott's son, was especially an inspiration to me because he was close to my age, and I watched him train for his black belt. Like the others, he encouraged me to do my best and get my black belt, and he led by example.

The one part of my journey that will always stay with me is the first time I took the black belt test. During that test, I fell on my neck during takedowns. I vividly remember lying on the floor and begging myself to get up. I told myself that if I didn't, that made me weak. It took a minute or so to actually give in to my self-goading. For the next ten minutes, I argued with my mom – who I've tried to convince to let me quit martial arts when I was little – to let me stay and finish the test. In the end, she won the argument, and I went to the hospital. I hated every minute of being there when it meant missing out on getting my first degree black belt.

For the next year, I dreaded retaking the test. I gave in to my negative thoughts and told myself that I was weak, incapable, and didn't deserve to get my black belt. Every once in a while, I would voice these thoughts during class. Scott told me that a belt is really just for holding up your pants, and I was clearly already a black belt. Master Joe told me that I didn't fail because I didn't quit after my injury.

It took a long time (the entire year from the first test to the second one I took if I'm being honest) until the words really sank in. Even during that time, I knew I wasn't in a mentally sound place. I let my disappointment eat away at me, and I made myself miserable by giving in to these thoughts.

This entire journey for me was about earning that black belt even if I was reluctant to even try to earn it at first. However, I know now that it's not about earning the black belt in the end. It's about not giving up. At least that's what I got out of my journey, and I intend to continue it.

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