

An End and a Beginning: My Black Belt Journey

by David Lang

Earning a black belt in Tae Kwon Do is both an end and a beginning. It is the fulfillment of a lifelong dream, and the start of what I hope will be a lifelong journey.

I have wanted to practice martial arts since I was a kid. From watching reruns of Adam West's *Batman*, *The Lone Ranger*, and *Kung Fu*, I learned that you never back down from a bully. As I got a little older, I moved on to reading tales of Medieval knights and other heroes who nobly stood up for the weak and oppressed. I desperately wanted to be such a man—someone with the heart of a lion.

There was just one problem. I didn't have the body to match my heroic aspirations. I was short, scrawny, and pretty useless in sports. I was a natural target for neighborhood and schoolyard bullies, at least until they realized I had too much Batman in me to cower. Refusing to back down was usually enough to get them to leave me alone, but I did have a couple of persistent bullies, and I did long for the ability to "teach them a lesson."

To 98-pound-weaklings like myself, martial arts held out the promise of an advantage over our more intimidating rivals. Yet somehow, I was never able to pursue martial arts as a kid. By the time I reached high school, I knew a couple guys who were black belts in a martial art, and I regarded them with a special kind of awe. In our testosterone-driven swagger wars, they were the guys whose prowess nobody questioned.

By my sophomore year, I had become a Christian, so I found it easier to walk away from schoolyard bullies. I had also started lifting weights, so the bullies suddenly took less of an interest in me.

Still, the dream of learning a martial art remained. Once I got married and began having kids in rapid succession, I could never justify the time or expense of learning a martial art. There were too many more pressing needs.

Then Josiah asked for karate lessons for his eighth birthday, and Lisa encouraged me to do it with him. This meant being the only grownup in the kids' class for a couple years, but it has been a joy to travel my martial arts journey with my youngest son.

Even so, I'm not sure I would have had the determination to continue all the way to black belt if it had not been for a key moment of inspiration early on. A couple weeks after we started, I came to FMAC's February belt testing. I wanted to see what to expect at our first testing in April. It happened to be the day Parker Anthony was testing for his second decided black belt. I had already marveled at Mr. Anthony's abilities in class, but now I got to see him jumping over people to break a board and kicking someone halfway across the room during sparring. In my late forties at the

time, I knew I might never do all the cool stuff Parker was doing, but I was certainly inspired to try.

Parker was actually able to perform the kind of superhuman feats I had always imagined black belts could do, but now that I am testing for black belt, I realize being a black belt is not about superhuman ability. My physical gifts are limited. My technique has plenty of room for improvement. Yet here I am, about to pass a major milestone in my martial arts journey. Along the way, I've been inspired by other black belts who were superhuman not for their physical abilities, but for their willingness to persevere in the face of major challenges. Not only does Mr. Dan have to learn all the same forms I do, he has to adjust them to accommodate his missing right arm! Ms. Asa earned her black belt by overcoming a long series of injuries. I've watched little kids like Drew and Piper battle through numerous no-changes because the boards just never seemed to break. Being a black belt is not about physical ability. It's about heart—the heart of a lion that simply will not quit.

My black belt journey has been a wonderful reminder that personal achievement is never possible without a great deal of love and support from others.

I have marveled at Master Wayne's ability to forge black belts over time. He never overwhelms the new student with fine details; he just asks for "horseshoes and hand grenades." Yet he never forgets to inculcate the finer points of Tae Kwon Do as his students become more experienced. He never just gives a belt rank. It has to be earned. That's why his black belts *look* like black belts. Yet he can break the news of a "no-change" in such a way that you remain motivated to try again—or in my case, again ... and again ... and again!

The *Family Martial Arts Center* is aptly named, because it really does feel like a family. Whenever we have missed a few classes, Sue has contacted us to make sure we're okay. When I was laid off earlier this year, you were kind enough to make sure it didn't derail our martial arts journey. Thank you.

Our fellow martial artists and their families genuinely cheer one another on. It's truly amazing. You have created an atmosphere in which no student sees another student's success as a cause for envy, but as a cause for celebration. After all, if another student can do it, I can too. Where else but FMAC are you constantly told "You rock!"?

Of course, FMAC's name is also a reminder that our black belt journey depends upon the support of our actual families. My wife, Lisa, has been Josiah's and my best cheerleader. She has sat through countless hours of belt rank testing and belt ceremonies. She has borne the financial sacrifices, the late dinners, and the impromptu sparring matches in the middle of the kitchen. She has sympathized with the bruises and the broken finger, yet without scolding us for wanting to go right back and spar the next day. She makes us feel heroic.

Then there's "Jo Jo." Josiah has made my journey to black belt so much fun. I am so intensely proud of that kid. He'll spar someone twice his size without an ounce of fear, so I know I'll never have to worry about him being bullied. He has remarkable physical gifts, and I can't wait to see him jumping over people and breaking boards like Mr. Anthony. Best of all, his dedication to practicing his forms, his board breaks, and his techniques has inspired me to keep at it even when grown-up obligations give me a thousand reasons not to. I have loved sharing this journey with him.

Earning my black belt is the fulfillment of a life-long dream which has been renewed and given new shape by the people who have inspired and supported me along the way. I once thought black belts were superhuman. Now I recognize they are just super-dedicated. Now that I'm here, I realize I still have so much left to learn. Martial arts takes a lifetime to master, and a black belt is simply a major milestone along the way.

It's a bit like climbing the highest mountain you can see, only to realize when you reach the summit that there is a whole range of higher mountains in the distance beyond. I have no idea how many of those higher mountains I will be able to ascend, but I'm still enjoying the journey, and I intend to practice "martial arts for life."