

From backyard martial artist to Black belt: My journey

My black belt journey did not just start when I entered the dojang 8 years ago no, it was many years earlier when I was just a child.

I wanted to become a martial artist ever since I can remember, my father was Puerto Rican and my mother was Canadian French. Growing up in rural southbridge Massachusetts in the seventies, I encountered a lot of racism, and had many fights.

My father hailed from Santulce Puerto Rico one of the roughest communities on the island, there he earned the title Juan el boxiador, which means Juan the boxer.

He self taught himself English by reading the Bible and many other books.

Ever since I can remember he used me for a punching bag, practicing techniques on me trying to teach me how to fight, one day he brought home a book that had karate techniques, at that point he started practicing karate techniques on me.

I had a chance when I was about 5 to take karate classes but not being able to associate with many kids because the color of my father I was kind of timid around people.

My mother as I said was French Canadian she grew up in southridge, she met my father when she was 19 and he was around 23.

There weren't any dark skin people and only a handful of Puerto Ricans that lived in southbridge including my wife Evelyn's family the Serranos.

I had a lot of family on my mother's side cousins, aunts, uncles, grandfather and my grandmother but as soon as my father and my mother got together they disowned her, except for my grandmother and it seemed like she was the only one besides my father and mother that love me.

So it was just us my father Juan, my mother Lucille, my three sisters Lisa, Linda, and Jeanne and my best friend my mémé.

I grew up, I guess, as normal as I could be, having three sisters that were always bothering me and I was constantly in trouble, if I wasn't practicing what I learned from my father on my sisters, then I was leaving the house without permission.

I walked approximately 3 MI at 6 years old to go to the candy store on a busy highway, amongst other capers, I had no fear, it seemed like my fear switch was broken. Years past and I never stopped thinking about what my father taught me about fighting, it was ingrained into me, we still fought, I was bigger now but was never able to come close to defeating him and when I would come close with a couple of good moves he would hit me harder to put me back in my place, I loved martial arts and practiced with my friends.

I fought many times when bullies would call me the n word and other derogatory remarks.

Around that time my wife's brother Jimmy David and Louis started practicing backyard martial arts, Jimmy learned from his brother David who was taking martial arts class at a local martial arts studio, and we practiced daily, running miles, lifting weights, and practicing, practicing, practicing.

I used what my father taught me and also what Jimmy and his brothers knew, and became pretty proficient at fighting I was 19 at that time.

I started working in Connecticut with my father in a woolen Mill, I hated that job, but southbridge was so small it was hard for me to get a job, and I needed money to help support myself at home, my father said "If you want to stay here, you need to earn your way that means you have to work and pay rent, for food, a room, and amenities," which was fair and I didn't mind working.

I still practiced with the fellas, and on break times at work I would roam around the giant factory looking for places to practice. there were all kinds of pulleys for pulling up bales of wool,

so I would tie my legs to the pulleys and stretch my legs up until I could do a full split, I would also use the bales for punching bags, I would scissor front snap kick pullies that were around 7' high.

We watched martial arts movies, they had Kung Fu theater every Saturday also we rented vhs cassettes of every Bruce Lee movie and watch them over and over, then we practiced what we saw.

Working one Wednesday afternoon, I decided to clean the machine without shutting it off, oblivious to what was about to happen.

I opened up the cover of the machine and proceeded to clean the doffer, which is a needle impregnated roller, and was pulled into the machine I believe then as I did today martial arts saved my life!

In my mind I always invisioned myself being faster than the machine, but boy was I wrong that day as I was kneeling on the machine with my arm locked between the rollers, and being pulled in inch by inch I took a deep breath looked back, and kicked the belt off with a mule kick which stopped the back breaker of the machines.

I tried to pull my arm out but I was locked in with a death grip, I was trapped.

I tried not to panic, I called for help but nobody answered for about 15 minutes, the machines were loud and I tried pulling my arm out again but it was futile.

I yelled for my father as he was turning the corner walking in front of the machines at that point he ran towards me.

My dad warned me about the dangers but as I said my fear switch was broken at an early age.

He said I'll be right back I'm getting help, the bosses came with a toolbox and started trying to pry the cover off it was welded on and they couldn't get it off.

Soon the paramedics came I could hear the sirens thru the windows all the machines were turned off at that point, I thought in my mind I've never heard this place so silent.

They proceeded to use the jaws of life to pry me out all the while I had no tears I was calm I breathed, I meditated, I went into my own mind as I did many times before I meditated and prayed.

They kept asking me if I could pull my arm out but it seemed the machine did not loosen up finally after 45 minutes to an hour in the machine I felt the machine loosen.

At that point I felt my body draining I was dying, but I did not want to give up I did not want to give up on myself and my father and my mother I needed there forgiveness!

Everything went in slow motion at that point I don't know if it was because of meditating, a state of shock or between life and death from the loss of blood and just hallucinating, but at that point I reached backwards, my father put his hand in mine as the needles penetrated my knees and I through myself backwards and my mangled arm was released from the machine.

When I was released from the hospital about a month into my recovery Jimmy David and I went to Westfield dam, above the dam there was a flat grassy area where we used to practice, and I wanted to get back into martial arts I had lost around 40 lb and went from 165 down to 125, and was sparring with David when he threw an ax kick and it landed right on my right shoulder I dropped to the ground in pain and didn't practice martial arts again for years.

It was a trying time for me filled with more downs than ups, and trying to find who I was and where I fit into the world.

It seemed people were more prejudice towards one arm people than when I was just half colored and they call me the n word, from girls always around me and wanted to be with me. to some of those girls wouldn't touch me and said my arm was gross.

Kids would cower in back of their mothers in fear, i was monster, from having no fear I was

afraid and didn't like the feeling.

I had a hard time asking girls out at that point, out of fear that they rub against my arm and say it was gross.

Then Evelyn a girl I grew up with and went to school with came back to town, I went to her house to visit and reminisce, she didn't think my arm was gross and accepted me for who I was with all my faults even though I was still broken.

We left southbridge and moved to Florida, where we rented a house and I bought a punching bag and started training again, it felt so good but I had to adapt with one arm so I punched and kicked the bag until my knuckles bled.

I drove by a martial arts studio in the triangle plaza, and walked in and talked to someone there and they said I could take free classes for a couple of weeks but I didn't go back.

About 8 years later when my sub Dan was about 5 I went back, we had extra money and I wanted to enroll in martial arts, but it wasn't there anymore, I looked in the phone book and found the FMAC and visited, there I met this tall blonde headed martial artist he said his name was Master Gary Wayne he was a very pleasant gentleman and asked me for reasons why I wanted to take taekwondo, I discussed with him some of the reasons: my accident, my age, my health, my wanting to live longer to enjoy my son and wife, and that I would love to become a black belt, and that I had practice backyard martial arts with my brother-in-law's. He told me that he would train me and that it would be somewhat difficult for me, but with some modifications that I could do it.

So the next day I came back and met his son Rider who was teaching class, an awesome young man that was very respectful, I also met his wife Ms Katie one of the most wonderful people I have ever met so full of life and happy, at that time she was teaching Tai chi.

It was sparring day so I fought with some of the kids in the after school class, Ryder told me that day when he saw me sparring that I did great which made me feel more confident.

I started taking classes and met Mason, and Parker, and Ms Asa, at that time I believe they were blue belts.

They both were on the tournament team and knew their belt forms so I started watching them and amongst others that were there and started learning forms, one steps, sparring, and board breaking rapidly.

I was having so much fun, taekwondo is nice but not without its hazards, it seems I broke every toe in both of my feet with within the first 6 months, my mother always told to pick up my feet LOL.

Parker was fast and Mason was strong and accurate I had to move and move quick or get kicked.

I met Mrs Perez back then also I went to Saturday classes where she would stay later and help me in trade for cutting her grass at her house.

Months went by and I only knew how martial artists were in the movies, they were respectful, had dignity, were humble, and patient with others, and most of all they helped and listened to their Masters and did everything they were told to do.

So I asked Master Wayne if I could stay later everyday and clean the dojang for him and he said if I would like, it made me feel good to clean the dojang I felt like I was accomplishing things.

The fear that I had of my arm touching people and being called gross diminished, and I started giving people elbows instead of high fives.

Master Wayne came to me one day and told me that he needed somebody to help him train students, an assistant, me.

Needless to say I felt honored that Master Wayne asked me to help him.

I went home and cried tears of joy I was so proud of myself I went above and beyond what I thought I could do I befriended Parker, Mason, Brandon, Ms Asa, Ms gamboa, and others.

We helped each other out, tournament trainings were a blast we held nothing back we sparred like there was no tomorrow we broke boards we were enthusiastic we had great camaraderie.

I picked up kids at schools they didn't cower behind their mothers in fear anymore, they would greet me hi Mr Dan, and to this day I still get a tear in my eye every time a child says Hi Mr Dan and gives me an elbow.

At the height of my training and as a red belt my father-in-law became hospitalized and my mother-in-law became ill, we had to make a decision there was no one to take care of them. We decided to go to Puerto Rico and to take care of Evelyn's Mom, her dad passed away a week after she arrived, and two weeks later I was on a plane headed for Puerto Rico.

Master Wayne visited me with Miss Katie and Ryder, and Mr Jim also came with his family Miss Shirley, Daniel and Zoe, I was so happy to see these folks they were my family my martial arts family and they came to Puerto Rico to visit us.

Three years later we came back to Florida, Mr Jim found out after 8 months that I was back from a Facebook post, and asked me to help him at his dojang.

So I helped him for approximately a year but the hour and 15 minute each way ride took a toll on me and my health.

I contracted Bell's palsy from an ear infection, which had my face paralyzed for a short time.

It was a slow recovery but I still tried to help Mr Jim I never told him about the lingering effects the palsy had on me, and one day I had to leave I couldn't do it anymore which broke my heart because I like working with Mr Jim.

Within a year and a half I moved back to Eustis, master Wayne called me and we talked, he asked me if I would consider coming back to help him and continue my training.

I was all in, all of my old friends weren't there anymore, and Parker was working so I did not get a chance to see him I was hoping that he'd come by, until one day Miss Sue called me and said Parker had been hit by a drunk driver, I felt devastated, my friend.

Now you can have friends and your friends are close I have no doubt, but when you train and spar with somebody daily, they see who you really are in a physical, emotional and mental level, everyone that I ever trained with I have the utmost respect and admiration for.

Life hasn't been an easy journey for me, but I know that my God, my wife my son and Master Wayne will always be there for me.

But in coming back I've met a new group of Friends, and I see us like the cast of the Kung Fu theater movies I watched as a teenager.

Mr Chris is the solid big boy that is always in that restaurant with that bowl of noodles and chopsticks in his hand, Jacqueline is the chef with the cleaver that will not tolerate anything in her restaurant, Dave is the Shaolin monk that has supernatural God given gifts, jayla is the shy girl giggling but seriously furious, then there's Josiah the martial artist that can jump into trees 30 ft high, spin on an axis and kick your teeth out of your mouth and land in a kung fu stance, Anaka and Sagel are the sisters that always bicker but together are a force to be reckoned with, Daniel, Caden, Benjamin, Caleb, and Justin are the five Elemental warriors: water, fire, earth, air, and steel, Ms Stephanie is the dancer with the fans that have razor sharp tips. And Miss Sue the dojang mom that fixes us up when we're broken and takes care of everything behind the scenes.

And I am the one that left the dojang, got beat up and came crawling back, asking the master to finish training me so I can go back out into the world and defeat my enemies and avenge my friends death!

Master Wayne hahaha! Master Wayne the Master, the teacher, the Wise Wise teacher, with the long stringy beard and mustache, that he keeps stroking with one hand and the escrima stick in the other hahaha!

This is how I see us a ragtag band, the elite of the world, the heroes, if you will, learning, training, focusing our eyes, our minds and our bodies.

I have reached another plato and this is what being and living a martial artists life means to me and I have become: A FIRST DEGREE BLACK BELT!