

WHAT KARATE MEANS TO ME

by Michael Geard - age 16

I remember when I first wanted to join karate. It was in Ontario, we had just moved there. I was in a large school with over 1000 students; the school was rougher than the ones I was used to in England. I remember being beat up by two Italian kids because they didn't like my shirt. This is what first got me interest in karate. I wanted to learn how to defend myself so I could beat them up.

I joined Sensei Greg Melleor's karate school and I was so excited I couldn't wait to begin. What first impressed me was the respect that the students had for one another and for the Sensei, it wasn't at all like the disrespect the kids showed the school teachers and the adults. I was also impressed with the way all the students would neatly line up before and after class. I also realized karate took a lot of dedication and training.

Unfortunately we decided to move to B.C. just as I started to really get involved in karate. Fortunately Sensei recommended a good karate school to me in Parksville, so I was glad that I would be able to continue karate and not let my experience with karate end so shortly.

In the beginning karate wasn't too difficult for me at the new school because of the few basics I had learned in Ontario, but it was hard for me to remember the correct way to turn in the kata. I usually ended up with the wrong foot forward or the wrong hand blocking. I also had difficulties remembering all of the Japanese names for all the moves and how to pronounce them properly. It was also embarrassing for me to kiai but for some reason when ever you did it made your whole entire kata feel much better and more complete.

One of the best things I liked about karate was that everyone was so friendly and helpful. If I ever needed help with a move or a kata there was always someone who would help and nobody would ever put me down if I did something wrong. The dojo seemed more like a family than a bunch of students.

I remember my first tournament. It was a Shima Shiai between the Parksville and Nanaimo dojos. At first I didn't want to go, I was afraid I might mess up and forget my kata. But Erin Todsén convinced me to go and I'm glad she did because it was good to see how well you would do under pressure. It was also fun to see the higher belts spar. I remember watching Shane spar, it was totally exciting, he was smaller than his opponents but he would go in unafraid with a lightning punch and usually end up winning all of his matches.

When I received my yellow belt I was so happy, I couldn't wait to learn the new moves. Karate was real fun and I couldn't wait to go to class. In 4 short months I had graded for my orange. This was around the time I started middle school, I started making more friends and went out more. Sometimes my friends would ask me to go out with them on the nights I would have karate and it was a real struggle for me to say no and go to karate. I found it easier for me to stay home and watch TV than go and train but I realized that karate would be much better than watching TV. I also realized that even though my friends were going out and having fun, would that help them later on in the future? No. The next day they would be exactly the same, where as karate would positively affect the way I think and act and help me direct my life and succeed in my goals.

During red and green belt I found karate the most difficult; I had trouble getting into a good firm stance and was not training my hardest. I found myself slacking off a bit and only going halfway and not really trying when I did my moves. I used to look at people around me and set my standard of training to theirs, instead I should have pushed myself hard and set no standards.

I think I only started training and progressing once I got my purple belt and started going to adult class. I think I also started to love karate and decided that's how I wanted to live my life, as a martial artist. Karate affected me so much that during the day I would think - "Would a karate person do this?" "Would Sensei approve of this?". I would also find myself punching or kicking or doing my kata harder when Sensei was around hoping to hear those rarely spoken words - "That's right" or "That's good". In adult class I found more people to look up to and try to be like, like Shane or Pat. During a class I would look over at Shane and try to punch faster than him or try and get a lower stance, but unfortunately his stance is always lower and stronger and his punches faster and more powerful than mine. But that only makes me want to train harder and maybe one day my form will be as good as his.

I also find it more exciting the higher you get in karate. There always seems to be more opportunities, like the demo team. Going to summer camps and learning new kata and self defense as well as meeting new people is really enjoyable too, but it's also fun to be by yourself with your friends and being able to stay up late and have fun!

It was also good for me to go to the blue, brown, black belt classes, it feels like a privilege to go to a class where you learn different techniques from the normal class and it's fun to see Shane spar Sensei Nordli and finally see Shane being beat up because no matter how hard I try I can't seem to put a scratch on him.

I think that sparring is important and it teaches you a lot and shows how you would react in a real fight. Sparring has helped me in two main ways, the first lesson it has taught me is that I am not as good as I think. I remember when I was in junior class I thought I was pretty good, but that changed when I started sparring Brian and Shane, after about the 4th or 5th time I hit the floor I knew I needed some major improvement in my technique, which you gain through kata, so it was more important for me to intensify my training in that area.

It has also taught me a lesson in fear. During a tournament I remember having to spar what seemed like to me a giant! He was a few feet taller than me and a lot bigger! I remember being so afraid of being hit that I wouldn't commit myself in any of my punches, needless to say he beat me with ease. I was so angry at being beat that from that fight on I learned not to think of being hit, but how I'm going to hit him.

Although I think sparring is important I think it's nowhere near as important as kata. Kata teaches you etiquette as well as how to get the full power out of all your moves. It also has a lot to do with your mind and you visualizing your opponent and thinking of yourself as being the best, destroying your opponent.

Karate has changed my life totally, it's not just a sport or an activity that I go to twice a week. It's how I live my life, it has changed my attitude and how I think. My life is more organized and it has given me a future and helped me achieve things I would never have if I would have been sitting at home watching TV or out with friends.

Karate has also shown me that the best defense is to walk away from a fight and by doing that you have already won. I'm glad I never got my revenge when I was beat up, in a way I should thank them because it was them who made me first join karate.