

My Tae Kwon Do Journey

Three years. In three years, not much has changed. I still work at the same job, go to the same church, live in the same house, and drive the same car. I'm still in my 40s (for a little while longer). I probably have a few more gray hairs and weigh a few more pounds than I did three years ago. I still have the same three stripes on my black belt. It's been a long time since my last tae kwon do test.

In the early years of my tae kwon do journey, there was always the urgency of getting ready to test. As a colored belt, I was taught a new technique at nearly every class. As many colored belts do, I tested every two to four months and demonstrated that new knowledge.

I was motivated! In class I observed other students doing forms that I hadn't learned yet. Toi Gye—mountain blocks! I wanted that next color belt and I was excited about the milestones that went along with the belt. My green belt was a ticket to Art class. My brown belt took me to the back row at Friday night class. I wanted to earn my black belt from the moment Master Gary Hall tied that yellow belt around my waist.

I wanted to keep up with my peers and hold my place in our class's lineup. Perseverance was the key for me. I can't jump as high as I did when I was seventeen or as high as I did as a green belt but I can set a goal and stick to it. Many students, children and adults alike, were brown belts when I earned my yellow belt, and never made it any further. Most students that stop coming to class become interested in other sports or choose not to make the commitment to three nights of class per week.

Tae kwon do is important to me and I've stuck with it. For eleven years my son and I have participated in class together, usually side by side. He was six in a size zero uniform; now he's eighteen in a size four uniform with a black belt tied around his waist. His push-ups look a lot better than they used to! I'm proud to call him "sir."

I've made many friends over the years; we're from all walks of life but we wear the same uniform on Friday nights. I appreciate their encouragement and support.

Three years. It's a long time to wait between tests; as it turns out waiting has been the biggest hurdle I've faced on this journey so far.

It's hard to maintain the same level of determination over three years. It's easy to skip class; the stakes are not as high as they were when I was a colored belt. No one is going to pass me if I miss a few weeks. I don't break boards every week like I used to. I'm holding boards for the other students and I forget to get one for myself. I practice my black belt forms alone before class.

Some things have changed in those three years. I have a new dobok that replaces the one I've had since I was a white belt. I didn't outgrow my old uniform or wear it out—it has a new name on the back. Heritage Tae Kwon Do. I'm proud of my instructors Master Hall, Master Slatten, and Mr. Strade for the leap of faith they've made. They are wonderful instructors. One of my proudest moments on this tae kwon do journey is testing with them today; it's an honor.

Mr. Thomas is the lead instructor for our branch in Trenton. I'm his highest ranking student so I teach the class when he's not there. Earlier this year, we had to relocate our dojang not once, but twice. Our student numbers have suffered. At the end of a long workday, there are many nights when I'd rather go home than show up to class for three students.

I told myself it was time to quit. I've gone far enough; I'm satisfied with my progress. This is further than many other people have gotten. But I just keep showing up.

Or I could just stay a 3rd dan for the rest of my tae kwon do career. I can keep showing up to class with the same three stripes.

The students we have now don't remember me having any less than three stripes on my belt. As far as they're concerned, I've always been a black belt. They don't remember me as a yellow belt. (For that matter, I don't remember Mr. Thomas or Master Hall as a yellow belt!) Our young students are looking forward to testing for high blue and yellow in December. You have to earn those colored belts you wear around your waist but

when I tell them about my own test it's like when their grandma tells about her black and white TV or her phone with a cord. They might think I hatched out of an egg with my black belt on.

I owe it to them to keep going. I'm ready. This three years is over and it's time to test for 4th dan. Even though I thought I was done, I realized I'm not. This test honors my teachers, Mr. Thomas, Mr. Strade, Master Slatten, and Master Hall, more than it satisfies my ambition. You can rest along this journey but you can't stop.

And this test is for my fellow students. We all learn by testing, being nervous, stepping outside our comfort zone, trying something hard, succeeding or failing. I'm not one of them if I'm not moving forward.

I'm a student of tae kwon do, always growing and developing, sir!