

What a Black Belt in Tae Kwon Do Means to Me

Mark E. Childers

After much pleading and insistence on the part of my seven year old daughter, my wife and I consented to allow her to try a Tae Kwon Do class. By age seven she had tried dance, piano, gym, and more. Each of these new and exciting undertakings cost successively more money and all resulted in early boredom and subsequent disinterest on the part of my daughter. To my delight, Tae Kwon Do has been different.

Without the introduction to this martial art via my child, there is little chance I would have ever set foot in a martial arts school. What a mistake that would have been! There was only a short time of watching her take classes, and seeing the end or beginning of the adult classes as we entered or exited the school, until I decided to give it a try as well. Yes, I felt embarrassed and awkward at first. So much so, that I didn't even want any of my family or friends to know I was involved. Immediately the children, teens, and adults in the school all went far out of their way to welcome me. The adults in particular all assured me that they had suffered similar apprehensions and they graciously encouraged me through my fears and challenged me to reach beyond my expectations of myself. The family oriented environment I discovered was not at all aligned with my mental picture of what learning martial arts was all about.

My initial reason to join the school despite my fears was the opportunity to take "Family" classes with my daughter. I love her so deeply, and time together is precious. Everyday it seems she gets a little bigger, a little older, and needs her Dad a little less. Any parent can tell of a similar experience and how much it breaks their heart. I thought this might build a bond between us that could be nurtured throughout not only the rest of her childhood, but into adolescence and beyond by giving us a common interest, common goals and shared accomplishments. My initial hopes have been far exceeded.

I was given the privilege of holding the first board my daughter broke. We have often been privileged to test together. She and I attend class together regularly, and I observe or assist in her classes as often as my work permits. Tae Kwan Do has given me a great tool to build common ground, dialog and communication between myself and my daughter. We talk even more than ever and now, as she is growing "too big to be my baby," the bond between us is remaining in tact. There is even the added dynamic of closeness as we observe, coach and encourage each other to be and do our best in our martial art. I am, and will always be the "Daddy," but now, through Tae Kwon Do, we are also becoming dearest friends. What an honor as a parent to be so perceived by my child while maintaining the strong discipline required of a good parent. The discipline and respect for authority taught to all students, both child and adult, helps my daughter to understand that while I am "the Boss," I only and always have her best interest at heart. By helping her learn this concept at an early age, it is my hope that her trust and faith in me to seek her best, even in times requiring discipline, will remain well into her more advanced formative years.

To earn a “Black Belt” seemed a far off goal in the beginning. There were hopes that I could achieve that goal, but not much confidence that it would materialize. After our first belt test, my daughter and I discussed whether we wanted to just learn and enjoy the benefits of learning Tae Kwan Do, or if we wanted to really give what it takes to earn our black belts. She declared her intention to earn a Black Belt with typical seven year old enthusiasm. While I am sure she did not fully understand the work and commitment involved, I saw this as one of the best opportunities I would ever have to show her the value of making a commitment and finishing what you start. At this point I knew that if my health could hold out, I had to earn a black belt, hopefully WITH my daughter, but with or without her I had to give her the right example of achievement and commitment to complete a determined goal without giving up.

As our training progressed, my daughter’s interest both increased and decreased over the time we trained together. If I had not been involved I know she would have quit and moved on to another experience having not achieved her goal and dream of a Black Belt. While that is normal for a child of her age, I was thrilled that she continued not because she was driven but because she wanted to continue training with me. This was great assurance to me that my daughter was, in fact, beginning to understand the concept of commitment to a goal. As she saw me continue to train even when I didn’t “feel” like it, she began to understand that earning a black belt was more than just attendance and play time. She saw it was something that must be diligently worked for.

What does earning a Black Belt in Tae Kwan Do mean to me? It means sharing time with my daughter. Earning a Black Belt means completing a hard earned goal in my daughter’s presence and with her support, while demonstrating to her that success is not for common people. It means being uncommon. It means doing more than most are willing to do and receiving the rewards associated with hard work and commitment. Earning a black belt means teaching my child that she can not expect anything of value to be given to her by someone else. It means teaching her to understand that her success or failure in life is determined solely by her own choices, hard work, and commitment to achieving her goals. Earning a Black belt means a lot more than simply getting in shape and learning a series of techniques. It has surprisingly little to do with the physical aspects that originally seemed to be the whole purpose of the learning. Earning a Black Belt is the completion of a physical and emotional journey from a beginning of excitement and enthusiasm to a place of introspection, self evaluation and personal determination. And most surprising of all to me, earning a Black Belt means I have just barely mastered the basics of Tae Kwan Do and have more to learn in the future than I could have ever imagined all those years ago when I first began my journey.