

ACP Essay

After twenty-eight broken boards, hundreds of bruises, and eighteen belts, all that stood in the way between me and my Black Belt was one question.

“Justin?” called out Sensei.

“Yes, sir,” I quickly replied, standing at attention.

“What is Tae Kwon Do?”

I could have easily defined Tae Kwon Do as a Korean self-defense martial art. However, there was more to the practice than blocking, kicking and punching. It all started eight years ago when I met that tall, slender man with a firm handshake, dressed in a simple white uniform. Tied around his waist was a black belt with white sketchy characters embroidered on it. You could see it had been worn for a long time because the edges were threadbare. Later, I found out it was a sixth degree Black Belt. He was to become my Master, my Sensei; a life teacher who I would honor and respect, as he guided me through years of training. And as I passed each test, he would honor me with his bow as he handed me my next colored belt.

I remember wearing my size SMALL white uniform with a white belt, when I first began Tae Kwon Do. I was with kids around my age, all squirming and drifting off like a group of monkeys, so much so that Sensei had to pause countless times to bring them back in focus. Watching him from that day, I learned about respect and honor. As other classmates and I advanced to yellow belts, I knew that I wanted to go beyond and succeed. I knew this was going to be a commitment to discipline my young body and mind; that I would have to face up to a series of more difficult sets, rounds of sparring, and chopping or kicking through more layers of wood. It was not just more techniques and sparring, but now I realize it was making a promise to myself.

I now have many colored belts hanging on my wall, including my Black Belt. The boards represent the roadblocks in my life and the importance of perseverance. The belts represent growth and maturity, and the various stages in my life growing up. They also stand for stamina, commitment and integrity. Sensei taught us not just about being skillful fighters, but being a community of genuine citizens; to have an indomitable spirit as we went beyond the walls of the dojo.

Each day as I entered and exited the dojo doorway -- barefoot in white uniform with a belt tied around my waist -- I remember the ritual of bowing. I realize now that I bowed to honor all that came before me and respect to what was to become in my life.

Justin Lee