

Perseverance and Dedication on the Road to Black Belt **by Sumeet Kishnani- April 2017**

This April marks the culmination of a journey that started seven years ago. It started in another land, in what seems like another time, and the goal in sight marks, above all, the level of commitment and perseverance through all these years.

It all started in the spring of 2010. Prem had just joined a Shotokan karate school. Neelam and I said we always wanted the kids to have two life-long skills. We wanted them to be able to swim, to save themselves or someone else in water; and we wanted them to be confident; to never feel like there was anyone or anything that could intimidate them. I stopped by after work one day in Westfield, NJ. I watched his class and decided to take a class for the first time. It seemed so easy and fun. We did a few stretches, pushups and sit-ups. We started with warm ups, including jabs, crosses, hooks, and uppercuts. Then we moved on to a dozen or so front kicks. The class started at 7:30PM. By 7:38, I was in the men's room, throwing up, full of nausea. Neelam, my wife, and our lovely boys, Prem, and Rohan were probably wondering what happened. I told our instructor that this was a beginning, not an end. Two weeks after that spectacular 8-minute flop, I was doing two hours per day of martial arts and kickboxing. I liked the feeling. It was nice to go to a place where you could yell, hit the bags, and sprint around, and no one would tell you to be quieter or not hit the bag so hard. I was hooked. 3 years later, all 4 of us were loving the curriculum. We went to tournaments and won medals. One of my favorite wins was a County-wide tournament where I got a gold medal for my bo staff form. I still remember that form and practice it in my backyard a few times a month. Neelam loved the kickboxing classes. Life was good. Then we found out it was time to move to Texas. We were excited about it for so many reasons, but Prem and I looked at our red belts, and we wondered if our journey to black belt would ever be complete. Our instructor, Sensei Mario, gave us an honorary black belt bearing the name "Kishnani Family" on our going away party.

In January 2014, after we moved, we finally decided to look for a school in Allen, Texas, to continue our journey. Long story short, we didn't find a Shotokan school we really liked in the area. We had driven by the US TKD Academy, that big building near the Event Center, and it always seemed like there were a lot of people in there. I called at 7AM on a Monday morning and left a voicemail. It must have been a 5-minute message describing our history, our level of commitment to our previous school, and asking for a call back. A few minutes after 9, we received a call from a gentleman who identified himself as "Master Atuon". We spoke for about 20 minutes. I stopped by the school later that day. I was in awe at that school and Master Atuon's demeanor. It seemed really nice. There were black belts on the wall. The



school was WTF-accredited. There were many instructors, and many students. We must have visited every school in Allen in the next two days, but something about this school felt different. When we came back, a wise man named Stephen Mass asked us how we liked our “shopping trip”. He told us to be comfortable with our decision, whatever it may be, but that this school and Master Atuon “saved his life”.

In the end, we decided to join because of a few reasons. First, there was the WTF accreditation. It was exciting to think of getting that ID card at the end of this journey. Second, the instructors were really into it. Mr. Mass and Mr. Pedro ran classes with an iron fist. Third, the testimonials online were really nice. We found out exactly how this school literally saved Mr. Mass’s life. I reflected on that first day in martial arts in NJ. I certainly wasn’t out of shape at that time, but I wasn’t proud of how I was lying on the floor eight minutes into warm-ups on my first day of class. I recalled what a big difference the first two weeks made, and I felt like I could relate to Mr. Mass’s story. Finally, we saw that Master Atuon’s school and the curriculum he designed were a serious endeavor. This wasn’t a place to play games. This, like our previous school, was a place that demanded excellence, and rewarded those who would meet the call. The most important thing, however, was another thing that Mr. Mass told us on the first day – he said they have class here every day for every rank, and that “no one is going to tell you that you’re coming here too much”. With a busy travel schedule, it was nice to be able to walk into class on a Tuesday this week, and a Thursday the next week. It reinforced the seriousness of the school in our minds.

We trained hard. We were often there until an hour after the white belt class. When the instructors were cleaning the mirrors, we were still kicking bags, stretching, and practicing forms. And then we were back the next day for more. Master Atuon gave me the student of the month trophy on our first test. Rohan put a label on it with his name and kept it next to his bed for about a week.

As the months went by, and the training intensified, it was refreshing to have such a flexible schedule, to be able to literally walk into class any time I was in town. What was interesting was that Prem and Rohan both enjoyed it also, and they appreciated that I was doing this with them. Prem said he wouldn’t be able to keep taking classes without me. In reality, I felt like it would also be hard for me to continue without him. On those rare days when he was sick or not in class, it felt strange, and it was just not as much fun.

That is why it’s so great to be able to step onto that floor one last time on this years-long journey and see Prem standing on the floor, to reach the black belt goal together. This is the summit we have been looking upon for the better part of a decade, and as we approach it, the shroud of darkness has been replaced with the light of attainment.

As we look back down the mountain, I am reminded of the wise proverb to help those who are behind us, so that they may also reach their same goal. I can relate to those white belts who need to take a break 8 minutes into their first class. I want to thank Master Atuon for bringing

this Academy to Allen, Mr. Pedro for his dedication to their students on those first two classes, Mr. Mass for his endless words of wisdom, the entire team of instructors who patiently worked with us, and Sensei Mario for his belief in us that we would one day reach this summit.

But more than anything, I want to thank my wife, Neelam, who told us to stand by our dreams when the travel schedule was difficult, when the kids were just not motivated to go to school anymore, and who persevered through rain, hail, snow, ice, and those blistering hot days to make sure that the kids would be able to fulfill their commitment, even when I couldn't join them. She remembered the dream even when those of us on the floor lost sight of the summit, when we had lost the forest because we were stuck among the trees. Without her encouragement and support, we wouldn't be here. She really does deserve this "Kishnani Family" black belt.