Tying Together a Black Belt Experience

 My head hits the wood, and SMASH! It breaks into millions of pieces. The world-class graders are in amazement at the rubble of a once woodblock that I demolished. But I am instead eyeing a black cloth amid all of the Federal people and the papers of grading. I nonchalantly sit down, consciously still staring at the belt. A black belt. *My* black belt. Victory is tangible. But before I get too ahead of myself, let me explain.

 I was at my black belt test. A test that took me four years to achieve, and to get there I had to manage a heap of kicks, punches, sweat, blood and tears. But nobody said earning a black belt would be easy. After all, I didn’t spend all of those years just sitting there; I was up and active.

 It all started off in 2007, when I first entered Chun’s Black Belt Academy, on Terrill Road. I didn’t know anyone too well, and I was a little nervous about joining with people I didn’t know. However, the first thing I noticed was that there were black dots on the white floor, which confused me. I could never add up why he had put those dots, but I could care less. Additionally, there were some sticks in one corner apparently used for fighting, and even a bunch of pads to kick. The floor space was 8 meters by 8 meters, a pretty big space. On the left wall, there was the American flag, the South Korean flag, and also another flag that said “Kukkiwon World Tae Kwon Do Headquarters.”

 Upon entering, I was greeted by Master Chun, my instructor. “Welcome to this academy, Omar-I mean Calamari,” he said, mispronouncing my name. “This academy will not only help you physically, but also mentally.

 “Now that you are here, you will have to obey all the rules. First off, upon entering and exiting the premises, you must bow down. Additionally, whenever you are speaking with me, you must end every sentence with sir. Then, do all commands I give out to you. All clear?”

 “Yes, Sir,” I responded.

 “If you want to be a true Tae Kwon Do master,” he continued, “you have to earn respect for even the simplest step: the white belt. Also, bowing will convey this respect that I give you and you give me.”

 Yes, Sir.”

 “If it can work out, come on every Tuesday and Thursday, as they have the no belt, white belt, and yellow belt classes. See you then.”

**…**

 Afterwards, almost too quickly, I started for real. I came regularly for classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays, and the same routine went on four a whopping four years, from stretching, sparring, and kicking to punching, games, and even meditation. Important events also occurred in the stretch, like my sister also joining, and so did my friend, and I was no longer nervous, even with people I didn’t know. Eventually the classes became a regular family almost.

 It also helped my school life. Earlier on I was slightly un-social and was very bad at common conversations, and was constantly bored. However, after gaining self-confidence and regaining my strength, I became more social and friendlier. Soon, I was appreciating that I joined this academy.

 Finally, one day, in 2011 I earned my red-and-black belt, which was just one step away from being an official black belt. My sister and friends also caught up with me, so all of us were at the same level.

 “Calamari, Sarika, Varun, and Monish, you are all now ready to train for the most elite testing preparation of them all, the Black Belt testing. It has been quite a journey for all have you, hasn’t it? But now, instead of just training physically, you will also train mentally and orally. I want you all to prepare a small speech about yourselves by next week, so we can simulate the actual test.”

 So I trained furiously, 24/7, not just at the academy but also at home, creating a speech about my life, because the graders weren’t just going to grade me on how my Tae Kwon Do skills are, but also on my aptitude and attitude.

 Finally, the day of my actual assessment, I was fully prepared. From doing constant push-ups to synthesizing a speech giving great detail about my life, I had acknowledged every concept for the test. However, once I arrived, my nerves returned. There were red-and-black and black belts all over the place, and some were even adults. There were even instructors I had no idea about, and their intimidating looks scared me. However, I took a deep breath and regained focus.

 Master Chun had explained to us the procedure of the testing day. First, all of us began to stretch for a few minutes, warming up our muscles. Then, at exactly 1:00, the actual test began. First, we had to do a series of stretches that tested our flexibility and endurance for how long we can stay in a position. Then, we did active exercises, like running, kicking/punching, and jumping side to side. After that, we did sparring with another person and self-defense for an attack.

 At this point, all the minor events had passes that didn’t resemble much importance to the final grade. But now, there were the most significant aspects: forms, wood breaking, and the speech.

 What forms are is choreography of kicks and punches that resemble a different level of skill for Tae Kwon Do. From a white belt, the lowest belt, to a red-black belt, which I currently was, I had to do every form perfectly in front of the judges. Sure enough, I did every one in my opinion very well.

 Now, we go back to the beginning, where I broke the wood. What I was doing was the most serene use of my head: breaking wood. Not only is my brain useful for smarts, but also apparently it is as tough as a rock. The people in the audience were cheering and screaming when they spotted that rubble, but my goal was still on focus.

 Last, but certainly not least, the speech arrived, worth a total of 25 of 100 points! But I was not at all scared, and my speech goes as follows:

 “Hello, my name is Calamari. I am 12 years old and am in 6th grade at Terrill Middle School. As a student in this academy, I take my work seriously, but at the same time have fun. Also, outside this academy I enjoy playing basketball, watching TV, and playing an alto saxophone. Having this black belt will mean a lot to me because it will now be a part of my identity, and it will always make me proud that I am part of society and am a black belt.”

 My speech was actually very long, so I just cut to the chase. But then, the moment I had been waiting for arrived, the giving of the black belt. Master Chun handed each of us a form, which listed the scores in each of the category. To my surprise, I got a fifty out of a hundred, just passing me!!!!!!!!!!! The minimum needed to pass was 50, and the only reason I passed was because the wood-break funded me, but my speech was terrible. I wasn’t upset, though. The important part was that I passed. I smiled, then laughed, and then cried in my head. This was the most important accomplishment of my life, which can be sewed together with a black cloth.