Jada Harley and Journey Decker

CIS Composition

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Hour: 1

Days at the Dojo

Intro

Dojo karate is not just a self-defense class. There is more to it than many people think, and we’ve had the opportunity to personally experience this for ourselves at the dojo karate studio in Monticello. At this studio a person will be welcomed with the push to join any one of their variety of classes. Age doesn’t matter and the student can expect to be pushed in a positive direction, growing with a group of others who share the same passion. Rather than working to be better than everyone else, each individual is working to be better than their yesterday’s self. The people in this group are some of the most respectable and fun people we’ve had the chance to meet, and it’s obvious that they have a positive impact on not only members, but their family, friends and everyone they’re around.

Preconceived Notions

When thinking of a karate class, we think of a bunch of black belts and expert fighters all in a room together. Often times our mind automatically thinks of very strong, disciplined students who has dedicated their entire lives to karate. We imagine a strict, black belt instructor who expects perfection from his students and for the students to follow directions without question. It seemed like a given that karate was an anger outlet for most people, but what we found is that we couldn’t be more incorrect.

Though all the instructors were black belts, it was very clear after about 10 minutes that they were not insanely strict people. Of course the instructor expected everyone to give 110%, but he didn’t expect perfection from his students. Not to mention, while the students do listen to directions, it’s definitely not without questioning or a little complaining. Most of the students were not expert black belts; in fact, many of the students hadn’t gotten their black belt yet. This group of students was all advanced red belt or higher, which means they were all extremely talented, however, they were not perfect and needed guidance from the instructor from time to time.

It was clear that the students in this class had lives outside of karate because they talked about it with other students and the instructor. The way the students interacted not only with each other, but with the instructor shows how laid back these students really are. That being said, it didn’t seem to us that they were trying to release their anger.

History

Forms of karate were first known to be practiced on the Okinawan Islands in the 1400’s ("History of Karate-Do"). “Very little is known of the exact origins of karate before it appeared in Okinawa, but one popular theory states that it came from India over a thousand years ago, brought to China by a Buddhist monk called Bodhidarma (“daruma” in Japanese)” ("History of Karate-Do"). In the 1400’s the Okinawan Islands were ruled by the Sho Shin dynasty ("History of Karate-Do"). The ruler of this dynasty was afraid of his people uprising, so he put a ban on all weapons ("History of Karate-Do"). This new rule forced the practice of different types of karate to be put “underground”. The formally independent Okinawan was no longer independent in 1609 when they were invaded by a Japanese clan ("History of Karate-Do"). This Japanese Clan was called the Satsuma clan, who lived by Samurai, “The Samurai was now the law of the land, and their skills with the Samurai sword allowed them to maintain their rule” ("History of Karate-Do"). The islanders had no weapons to fight back with, so they began to use farm tools as the modern weapons used in Karate like the bo-staff ("History of Karate-Do").

Okinawan people decided to combine their different types of martial arts to make what they called “Te” ("History of Karate-Do"). They changed the name in 1887 with the word “karate” ("History of Karate-Do"). “Kara” means China and “Te” means hand, so essentially “karate” means “Chinese hand” ("History of Karate-Do"). By the 1900’s, “an Okinawan karate master decided to start referring to karate as "Empty Hand" instead of "China Hand", thus finally eliminating any references to karate's Chinese origins” ("History of Karate-Do").

Karate became more and more popular in the 1900’s, it was even taught in public schools ("History of Karate-Do"). Karate began to spread to the United States during World War II when many Okinawans were in Hawaii ("History of Karate-Do"). “After the war, many United States servicemen were exposed to Japanese judo and karate. During the 40's and 50's, judo actually gained greater acceptance than karate, which lead to karate not being as widely accepted until the 1960's” ("History of Karate-Do"). After being accepted in the United States, it spread more easily across the rest of the world.

Environment

Since our first day walking into the dojo, our preconceived notions have been slowly disproved. The first area we entered is the waiting room, which feels chill due to the warm students trying to keep cool. The floor is speckled with red, black and white, and there is dojo gear and promotional posters all around. To the left is a kid’s area next to their many trophies. The kid’s area is a corner consisting of an area to sit and a TV with plenty of movies for kids to watch. For some reason while we had thought of karate students, never had we pictured them having kids and even bringing them with to their classes. On the opposite wall from the kids area is Mr. Z’s (the instructor’s) office. His office is a small room with a computer, office chair, and extra dojo gear like pads and gloves.

When walking into the waiting room there are rows of black, foldable chairs in front of a large window. The window says “Red dragon in-house tournament Nov. 19th” written in window markers. Looking through the glass window we see the dojo room. Similar to a wrestling room, it has one great mat floor and similar to a dance studio, the wall parallel to the window is one large mirror. On this wall was a dojo flag next to an American flag with karate belts hanging above the mirror. In the corner to the right of the mirror are medicine balls, gloves, pads, and other such objects. On the wall to the left of the mirror were mats and bo staffs. There are many motivational quotes around the dojo, and goals like “respect, discipline, and focus” which is displayed by the locker rooms.

While at the dojo there are a multitude of different noises that we heard. One of the loudest noises was the blaring music played while the students are working on routines or doing cardio. Throughout our observations we also noticed there was a lot of grunting and yelling while practicing their routines. The most obvious noise to us was the voice of the instructor, Mr. Z. He has a loud, boisterous and stern voice when giving instructions and encouraging his students.

We were lucky enough to observe the dojo during a couple different holidays. During Halloween the big window had “Halloween Party on Oct. 29th” painted on with more window marker and there were Halloween decorations everywhere, from spider webs to pumpkins, ghosts, and other fun decorations, they had it all set up for the holiday. During Thanksgiving there was a table to the left of the waiting room, chairs with colored pencils, and a bunch of posters where the kids could write what they were thankful for. Many of them wrote they were thankful for karate, family, and Mr. Z and drew fun little pictures to go with it.

Description of people

When in the dojo, the first things we noticed were the things we saw. To start, everyone wears a uniform with their last name on the back, a certain color belt, and socks--although some went barefoot. There were a variety of aged people with a variety of colored robes and belts, but a fairly even amount of boys and girls each class. The robes varied from black, red, and blue and the belts were advanced red and up. Ages varied from high schoolers to about 60 years old. During our interview with Mr. Z, we were told that the youngest participant at the studio is 2 and the oldest is 77 years old.

Both the students and instructor make the dojo what it is by working together and separately, but constantly motivating one another. In the classes we observed and participated in, the youngest was a teenager, while the oldest could be a grandparent. All ages, however, work together to complete the same tasks, but at their own rate. All the students work extremely hard and complain very little. Even though they are doing extremely hard cardio workouts, they always seem to be happy and smiling because they simply enjoy the class in its entirety. Mr. Z tried to be stern, but he was mostly a fun and happy guy. He often made jokes while trying to motivate his students to work harder.

During our interview with Mr. Z he explained how his favorites to work with are the little kids and advanced belts. He himself had been in soccer and dojo since he was 4 years old, and then quit dojo to do soccer during his middle and high school years. Then at age 22 he started up dojo again and he has owned his business for 10 years now.

Artifacts

Karate has many traditional artifacts incorporated in every class. One of the first things we noticed while observing was the use of the “Bo Staff”, or as we called it “that pole-thingy”. As we mentioned before, the bo-staff was one of the weapons inspired in the earliest times of karate when they used farm tools as weapons. We were immediately interested in this artifact specifically because of how talented the students were in using it. We are pretty certain if we tried to use the bo staff we would possibly hurt someone nearby. Somehow the students find a way to make whipping a giant pole around look graceful and smooth.

One thing that seemed a little confusing to us on our first day was the different types of belts. There are fourteen different belts that are given depending on which level the student is at. The first belt everyone starts with is the white belt; this belt is given after a student learns all the basic kicks and punches and combinations (Stormoen and Hourscht). After the white belt each belt proceeding requires the student to know more and more difficult techniques in order to receive the belt. The order of the belts are as follows: white, gold, green, purple, blue, advanced blue, red, advanced red, brown, advanced brown, 1st degree black, 2nd degree black, 3rd degree black, and 4th degree black belt (Stormoen and Hourscht).

Along with the belts, there are stripes that go on the belts. In order to receive the different stripes you must complete different tasks depending on what belt you are on. For example the gold and green belts require a student to attend a minimum of 5 classes before you can earn one black stripe (Stormoen and Hourscht). In order to move to the next belt, after gold or green, you must earn 4 black stripes and one red stripe (Stormoen and Hourscht).

Throughout the class they use a few other artifacts regularly. They use hand pads often when doing partner work. One partner holds the pads while the other partner does the moves instructed by Mr. Z (different punches and kicks). They also use gloves for the kickboxing class. The gloves are used when doing partner work with the hand pads. Of course they also have a uniform with their last names on the back, but the outfit has neither name nor real meaning behind it other than comfort while doing karate.

Rituals

The first 10 minutes before class are spent stretching to prepare for class. Often times we noticed that Mr. Z was still helping/teaching a student from a previous class with different techniques or routines while the class was about to start stretches. Once class begins they start by doing a little pre-workout with “workout Music” playing loudly in the background. Many times they would choose a workout to do and they were considered finished with the workout after each person in the class counted to ten. During some of the exercises, rather than sitting out while others were doing exercises involving their ankles, one girl with an ankle brace would do a different exercise or different version of the exercise so she could continue to participate.

They followed up the cardio by doing different karate moves (whatever they’re working on at the time) across the room. To us these moves seem “fancy” and difficult. While they are doing all these moves they will many times make noises when kicking or punching. The noises don’t seem to be actual words, more so like grunts. In order to use their time as wisely while doing this, they get into 3 small groups. The groups spread out around the room and then one person from each group begins doing their moves. When the person is done, the next person from that group would begin. We assume that they do it this way because there is not enough room for everyone to do it at once, and it also gives each student a chance to observe and learn from each other. After they finish their own individual routines, Mr. Z will yell out something like “defense” and then everyone will begin doing the same defense routine. Part of their class is to practice routines with the Bo Staff for about 10 minutes. Towards the end of class most days everyone begins to do their moves all at once, while Mr. Z walks around to help them with their technique. At the end of class each day they all get in a line facing Mr. Z with hands by sides, he’ll give some information about classes coming up, then says “chai-yut” and “kyungnet”, which he told us means “attention” and “bow”. Then they all bow and the class ends.

On our third visit, during the last 15 minutes a girl was going through her routine with Mr. Z so she could get a black stripe on her belt. In order to get the stripe she needed to perfect her routine. The routine consisted of doing different moves to music playing. While doing her routine she hesitated a bit and lost her position, but then the music was replayed and she continued again. After struggling a second time and shaking her head at Mr. Z, she tried again. The third time she made it all the way through and got her black stripe. They then bowed to each other and high fived. She came out of the room to see her mom and she seemed to be incredibly excited and Mr. Z seemed exceedingly proud of her.

Interactions with us

Throughout our time observing at the dojo there were plenty of comical interactions. Our second day observing there was a man who made us laugh the entire observation without even talking to us. He was the “jokester” of the class and seemed to genuinely enjoy making people laugh. It was no different when he saw us sitting in the waiting room. He had on a pair of pink children’s sun glasses when he turned around, saw us and exclaimed “Hey! There’s two of them!” Maybe it was the sunglasses, but we definitely thought it was hilarious. Weeks later he stood in front of the glass window shaking his head at us and asking when we were going to participate. He was also very interested in the paper we are writing and what it’s about. He even asked for a copy of his own!

Shortly after our first encounters with “funny guy” we found out that Mr. Z was not shy and no stranger to making jokes with his students and the observers. He loved to poke fun during the first observations because we were just watching and not participating. As a joke, he would call us chickens and we didn’t deny that it was true because we were terrified to join the class. He often would look at us during class and scold us for not participating or in one case had scolded us for yawning. After a long day we were both tired, and yawning just as Mr. Z looked over, he yelled “Hey! No yawning in my lobby!”

Interactions with each other

Mr. Z is a very interactive teacher which seems to make his students better at their techniques and skills. He always starts by physically showing his students what to do while saying the directions loud and clear so everyone can hear. Once the students begin, Mr. Z walks around the room making sure everyone is getting the skill and helps students who need it. Interacting with students one on one helps to motivate many of the students to work harder. He encourages the students to push themselves further until the timer goes off.

While walking around he often times “jams out” to the music playing and messes around with the students. On our third day observing they were working on some kicking skills and Mr. Z decided to pretend to get hit by one of the teen girls and fell to the floor dramatically. It soon became obvious that all the students adored Mr. Z. Every day, even if he gave the hardest workouts, everyone was always smiling and laughing because they were genuinely happy to be there even if they were to mess up. One of the girls couldn’t get her moves right one day and instead of getting frustrated, she simply started dancing which made everyone laugh.

After class was when some of the best interactions happened. For example one day one of the students said “I can still barely walk” to which Mr. Z responded “Oh you’re fine, you’re gliding now. Move like an old guy shuffling.” As I said before Mr. Z loves to call out people who don’t participate, so it was no different when class ended and cardio kickboxing began and two students left. When the two men left Mr. Z yelled out to them “Bye Chickens!” to which one of the men responded with “Bawk, bawk”. It is funny interactions like these that made the observations such a fun time for us.

Impact on Members

One thing we noticed when we started participating is the impact the dojo had on both the members and ourselves. The dojo was always a fun environment--even when we thought we felt like we were going to die, we were still smiling and having fun. Each person was positive and enthusiastic, yet disciplined and knew when to be serious and when to joke. They are also connected to the community and do food drives, coat drives, and other such events to help others, which in return helps the group to better themselves by learning to put others first. We believe that those involved in this group build better character and discipline because of what they are taught and experience through their instructor and fellow members.

Conclusion

Throughout our observations at the dojo, we gained an immense amount of respect for the students, teachers, and their prominent dedication and welcoming attitudes. It is rare to meet people with such positive outlooks about life and all the troubles that come with it. We are grateful to have been a part of such an amazing group, even if only for a couple of weeks. Throughout that time, we learned that the dojo is not just a place for strict, hardcore athletes, but is an inviting place for anyone and everyone to get connected with others, and grow as individuals.

Works Cited

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