

How Martial Arts Has Changed My Life  
By Michael Rigor

Usually, those who do martial arts consider it a sport. They do it because it will keep them fit and active. While this is true, there is much, much more to martial arts. Shihan has said to me and everyone else that martial arts does not stop at the dojo. It continues on for the rest of your life. The lifestyle of a martial artist is one filled with self-confidence and respect for others. It is not a sport for me, it is a part of my soul. A part that will always be there even when I don't formally take martial arts classes anymore.

When I joined about seven years ago, I joined because I was a victim of bullying. I was always being made fun of and being picked on. A few months in, that bullying stopped. My self-confidence was lifted due to the fact that I was not a victim anymore. I continued my study of karate seeing as it would give me the physical fitness I needed. When I got accepted into BBC, the fun really started to happen.

In BBC, you are allowed to take kickboxing, grappling, and kata. When I first started kickboxing and grappling, I was a little scared to fight people because I was new to all of it. But, after a few times I noticed that they weren't there to hurt me. I noticed that they were there to make me better. With that established, I now started to come to more and more grappling and kickboxing classes, trying to get good at it.

When I first went to kata class, I thought it was boring. I thought that doing a war dance was boring. It made no sense to me. But as I progressed through the ranks, the katas started to become more fun to perform such as the weapon katas and traditional katas. I learned that kata is actually a set of moves you need to know to progress to your next rank. If you knew it well, you knew all the techniques in that kata well.

When I took my test to become a black belt, I was already prepared for what would happen in the test because I had to take it for my brown belt. I felt pretty confident that I would pass my test with a knowledge of the testing process. But, when I got my black belt at that promotion ceremony, my life took a change for the good.

My life had instantly been crowned with one of the hardest things to earn in martial arts, a black belt. Most people quit at black belt because they felt that they were already experts at what they did. What they were oblivious to was the fact that becoming a black belt only meant that you knew the basics well. Once you become a black belt, your journey of martial arts really begins. It was that mentality that made me start on my quest to truly become a master of martial arts.

I felt responsible as a black belt, to show what AMMA has to offer to new students. That's what allowed me to be accepted into an elite group of hand-picked students for the STORM team. STORM is an acronym standing for Specially Trained and Organized Role Models. As a member of the STORM team, you get a patch on your right sleeve and the ability to help out in class as a demonstrator. This was, in my opinion, the biggest change in my life up to now. As a STORM member, I was not held to the standards of a regular black belt, I was held to the standards of an assistant teacher. This meant that I had to perform katas, techniques, kickboxing, and grappling with excellence at all times. I felt that if I didn't perform my absolute best every time, I was not correctly performing my job as an assistant teacher.

As an assistant teacher, after a while you get to lead the class by yourself for sometime. You need to be able to read the curriculum, understand what is needed to be done, and try and finish most of it so that when the instructor comes they can focus on what they need to do. This

was what sent my self-confidence through the roof, the ability to lead a class by myself without help. I fell in love with teaching students what I have been taught. It is the most wonderful thing to see someone pass for a new belt and being able to say that you helped him or her earn it. You are looked up to as a role model and people respect you.

Shihan often tells me of parents and sometimes even teenagers who ask if I am really twelve. They say that they've never seen anyone of my age who can lead a class with the spirit and confidence that I have. They also can't believe that the students have the same respect for me as they do towards instructors. When I hear these comments, it makes me feel so empowered. It assures me that I am doing my job well, not to mention that the students I am commanding are doing they're job well.

I've only told you about my actual martial arts achievements and some of how it applies towards the outside world. As a student of AMMA, you recite a code every start of the class. It includes the four keys of black belt excellence: respect, discipline, control, and spirit. All the instructors say that it doesn't only apply towards the dojo, but it applies even more to the outside world. In order to be successful in life, you need those four elements. Teaching has allowed me to gain self-confidence and the ability to be a leader. In this world, you need to be able to lead because most jobs involve leading yourself and a group of people to do a task. Being a leader allows you to do the right thing even when others aren't. That's what separates a leader from a follower, the ability to make decisions him or herself.

The discipline and control that I abide by in karate helps me in school by allowing me to do my work, follow the teacher, and abide by all rules laid out for me. To me, the most crucial discipline and control there is, is mental. It is easy to control yourself from moving around, but it is harder to control yourself from saying things that shouldn't be said as they might be insulting or rude.

However, the element that means to most and has changed the most in my life is spirit. Spirit is what gets you through everything you do in life, whether it is a test, a task you need to do, or even homework. As I progressed through karate, I became more and more self-confident until when I came to the point that I believed that I could do anything I set my mind to. That is what spirit is, believing in yourself to get to the end of something and sometimes even winning it. The spirit instilled in my from karate has allowed me to do various things in life. It has allowed me to do phenomenal on tests and quizzes in school. Spirit has allowed me to get to the New Jersey State Swimming Championships for swimming. Most of all, spirit has allowed me, like I said before, the comfort of knowing that if I set my mind to something I will always achieve it in the end.

Therefore, martial arts has changed my life in many ways. So, to those that say that karate is a sport, they are missing the whole point of karate. It is not to become the best kick boxer or grappler, but it is to become the best person you can be by applying what you have learned in karate outside the dojo. A martial artist named Gichin Funakoshi once said, "The ultimate aim of karate lies not in victory or defeat, but in the perfect of the character of its participants. Ginchin Funakoshi couldn't have been more correct.