

26 Years on the Floor

By Douglas Miles

In December of 1991, an eleven year-old me first stepped foot in the dojo that was located at 2117 O St, Lincoln, NE. Three large wooden signs hung outside, one said "Karate," another "Judo" and the last "Aikido." I was there to learn karate, and it would be the beginning of a journey that has defined my life. I remember when my father and I first went to the dojo and met the head instructor John Roseberry Shihan. I remember the smile he had on his face, we talked about why I was enrolling in classes, some general expectations and dojo kun.

What led me to the dojo? Well I was still in elementary school, about a year away from entering junior high and middle school. I had always been the subject of teasing from the other kids in my school. My parents were told that it was just kids being kids. I find it interesting that this very same thing today is called bullying.

Since this was 1991 and the Internet was still not a big thing I believe my father let his fingers do the walking. It probably didn't hurt that John Roseberry's dojo was listed in the phonebook under "A Roseberry's Sho-Rei-Shobu-Kan," which put it at the front of the yellow pages under martial arts. There were no big ads, or anything. The school had a motto "we don't demand your respect, we earn it."

As part of a winter promotion I received a free uniform and belt for signing up. Like many beginning students I probably had my uniform on completely backwards, again there was no internet or YouTube to look this stuff up on. I remember that my very first class was taught by Dean Donovan Sensei, one of the many black belts in the dojo. I remember working on kihon and spending a lot of time in Sanchin-dachi, the basic stance of Okinawan Goju-Ryu which was the style of karate I would be learning.

By around the time I reached the rank of green belt my teacher told me and my parents that he would like to see me in the adult class. It would be the best place for me to get the training that I needed and the skills to advance. So there I was twelve years old and going from training for three hours per week to over 7 hours a week. This additional training helped because I cut the time it took to go from green belt to brown belt in half.

By the time I reached high school much of the bullying had stopped. My confidence in myself was at an all-time high. I wasn't picked on as much, mainly due to the increased confidence, but another part of it was that I was training with the adults in karate class who were bigger and stronger, but I was able to easily hold my own. I remember how even the biggest varsity football players knew better than to pick on me.

At fifteen I achieved the coveted black belt. Although only a junior, I was the second person under the age of eighteen promoted to black belt. At that time my teacher had only been teaching about twenty-two years. I still have that original belt, along with the accompanying certificate in a shadowbox, proudly on display at home.

My junior year in high-school I decided to put my training on hold, at least formally to focus on academia, and to have some time to be a "normal" teenager. I found myself back in the dojo off and on from 1999 to about 2016. I had made arrangements with Roseberry Shihan to be able to train. For a time, I even had a class that was entirely mine to teach on Tuesday and Thursday mornings.

Twenty-two years after reaching black belt I am still training. I would like to think that I am older and wiser, but in many ways I am still like that brand-new mukyu. Trying to hold onto my beginner's mind or "shoshin" in Japanese. I know quite a few katas, bunkai, pre-arranged sparring drills, etc., but the desire to learn more remains. I'm still constantly exploring new approaches to techniques, in sense trying to discover the true riai of the technique. And what better place to search for these answers than on the floor.

I thought my formal training had come to an end in 2013 when Roseberry Shihan left his dojo to his senior students and moved out east to be closer to his children and grandchildren. We even had a nice farewell training followed by dinner.

My training continued on independently from then until sometime in 2015 when Roseberry Shihan came back to Lincoln for a convention. There was no way in the world I was missing that. At that time, I decided that I would find a way to make formal training part of my life again, and made changes to my work schedule to accommodate it. Although the dojo is under the leadership of Roseberry Shihan's senior students I still consider him my teacher. Within the past two years I have even taken up the study of Judo to help with my grappling and mat work.

In these twenty-six years since first setting foot in the dojo I have never had to put my skills to the test, came close once or twice. Once against a group of boys who were out looking for trouble, the second against a boy who was significantly bigger than myself. Both times I was able to diffuse the situation.

At the time of this writing, I am still one of the youngest adult black belts in the dojo, I still see quite a few familiar faces, but none of the children I originally started training with are still around. Roseberry Shihan even mentioned this in 2016 when he promoted me to the rank of Sandan.

At the end all I can say is "here's to the next twenty-six years! Ganbatte kudasai!"