

2nd Dan Essay Submission – Laura Wilson

When asked to write an essay on what karate meant to me, I instantly felt out of my comfort zone. Even though I've been a dedicated member of different clubs since beginning my journey at 8 years old, I'd never before been asked to put into words what karate means to me. Exposing such a big part of my life in such a different way felt rather intimidating.

Karate is something I've always been proud to be a part of, never shying away from sharing my experiences along my journey, however it is rare that I actually ever delve deep into how much the sport means to me.

I attended my first ever karate lesson at the age of 8, mostly to encourage my younger brother to try it out. My sister, brother and I continued lessons for a few weeks until they both decided to quit. At this point I reached a fork in the road – do I quit with them, or do I continue despite the external pressure to give up as well. It was at this point I made the conscious decision to stick with it... and I'm so glad I did!

Being a quiet, withdrawn child karate did wonders for my confidence. Though it was a slow start for me and I didn't work my way through the grades quickly initially, just having the feeling of belonging in my club motivated me to push myself. With each successful grading I gained more confidence, and in total I was an established member in my home club for 10 years, achieving my 1st dan in 2011 at the age of 16 and progressing to become the assistant instructor for the club. The growth I experienced over those 10 years is unsurpassable. My confidence improved and the opportunities that developed during my time with this club were second to none. Other aspects of participating in such a unique and amazing sport included improvement in discipline and respect, my health and fitness improved, and I also gained a lot from the teaching aspect in the latter years. I am endlessly grateful for that opportunity to influence younger/new members in the same way I was welcomed and encouraged within the club when I first started... It felt great to be able to give that back to the club. And though faces changed, people moved on, it always felt as if the club was family.

However, once I moved away for University, my training became less frequent, though I tried my hardest to keep myself involved. Finding another club initially was difficult, and though stepping into a new dojo with new faces was one of the most intimidating experiences of my life, I felt respected as soon as I entered. My second club soon became part of my university life as well as maintaining the way of life I'd previously been used to when training at home. This style of karate was different however, and though going into the dojo I wore a black belt round my waist, I felt as if I'd taken steps back and I was ready to learn this new style. With introduction of grappling techniques and more applicable self-defence, it was very out of my comfort zone. However, the overall team spirit and encouragement was incomparable. Even though I had no clue what I was doing with the ground work and grappling, everyone I was partnered with made the effort to teach me and encourage me to develop the techniques in the correct way. Again, I had successfully integrated myself into my second karate family, and it felt great. By this point karate was a means for keeping myself fit and meeting new people. It wasn't until I went back home in 3rd Year at University for my placement that my intentions changed, and I wanted to progress to new levels.

In 2016 I moved back home for a year for placement. In this time, I was welcomed back into my first club, where things had changed, and the focus was now primarily kumite and

competition karate. This brought a whole new aspect to my training. When I left the club was only just beginning to develop its competition skills, however when I returned (as well as a warm welcome) I also gained new friends, new skills and new confidence. It was from here my fitness developed and I gained more experience in kumite. And it was also from here my mental health was salvaged and my outlook on life improved.

It's not something I ever go into detail about, but I feel I owe a lot to karate for getting me through this time in my life. I was struggling with my mental health, University was overwhelming and karate provided a focus to get me through. Training up to 5 times a week was an outlet for me, it was a focus, something to take my mind off everything else that was going on in my head. Not to mention being able to take any undirected anger out on focus pads and kick shields, it was an escape. A relief. And I'll be forever grateful to have been part of such a supportive, wonderful family that was my karate team.

So, things began to improve gradually, I finally got through my four-year degree graduating with a 1st, and again, it was time to move on.

Just over one year ago, I moved to Sunderland for work, and after giving myself enough time to settle into this new routine, I told myself it was time to find a new karate family. Having started at a new club in Sunderland and finding it difficult to integrate and enjoy the classes, I left that one after a couple of weeks and it took me a while to get back out there and look for a more suitable club. It was then I came across Junsui Shotokan Karate Do. My first class was extremely daunting – new faces, new area, new accents, and new training styles. I was used to the kumite drills, the non-stop sparring, however JSKD focussed more on kata and basic techniques – the foundations of karate. Something I had not practiced in a long time. On the bright side, it didn't take me long to get into the swing of things, and even though my kata repertoire was shocking, Sensei Steven and Sensei Kim put that time and effort into teaching me the new standard - their standard. I learned new kata, new techniques and brushed up the things I already knew. I can now confidently say my standard of karate has never been higher. I now feel like part of the family that is JSKD, something that I expected to take much longer than just one year. I have been welcomed with open arms, I have been given advice, one to one training and been pushed to the next level, something I didn't think was even on the cards for me. The faith and support from the club has been insurmountable, I have made new friends, gained new skills and most importantly found my third karate family, one that I hope to be a part of for a long time. One that I hope I can influence and give back to, passing on knowledge and skills that I have gained through being a part of the JSKD family.

So, when I was asked what karate meant to me, it was easy. Karate means development and discipline. Karate means self-improvement. Karate means an outlet for when times get tough and I need something to focus on (or something to kick). Karate means a constant in my life that I won't and can't ever disregard. Karate means family. Karate will always be a part of me.