

The Journey To Brown Belt

by Sunisa Chanyaputhipong

Many months ago, sensei Tony Mendonca told us that he was hoping to take a few of us green belts down to Grants Pass in November to test for our brown belts. He wanted to make sure we looked like brown belts before we were promoted. He wanted to make sure that our kihon (basics) was solid and that we knew the bunkai oyo (application of kata) from pinan nidan to bassai dai. We would be the first in his dojo to earn this prestigious rank, so he wanted to make sure we were going to be good examples for the kohai to come.

Weeks of bunkai practice at the beginning of the year were truncated when a big group of us expressed interest in going to Nationals in July. Training became geared toward fine-tuning our tournament kata and timing drills for kumite. Brown belt testing seemed so far away that we focused mostly on Nationals training. Not that that was bad thing. We polished our skills and got our head in the game. We all tried our best in the competition, and I am so proud of the way our dojo represented our organization. I still recall the compliments and praise from the officials and onlookers when Brandi, Kristyana and I performed our winning team kata. Many of us even came home proud national champions and medalists. The moments of glory seemed short-lived. Once we were back in McMinnville, life was back to usual. And karate practice resumed as before. In my mind, we were going down to Grants Pass in November. We still had time.

In early September, sensei informed us that Soke invited us down to Grants Pass the following weekend. It didn't dawn on me for another couple of days that we were invited to go down and test for our brown belts. I don't think any one of us thought we would be prepared enough for testing. Sensei still had 2 months of stuff to teach us! That week, we packed our training with kata and bunkai for bassai dai. We thought that was what Soke wanted to see. We crammed for the test, just like we did in college. I did bunkai at practice. I did bunkai in my head before bedtime. I learned the last few bunkai sections on a vdo that my karate-ka made for me because I was working the last 3 days before testing. I did those in my head, and went through them in the morning practice before heading down. I carpoled with the Mendoncas, and Brandi and I even practiced at McDonald's and a rest stop off I-5 en route to Grants Pass. We knew it was going to be hard, and we wanted to be as prepared as we could. We are karate students. We are willing to faithfully train to strengthen our minds and bodies.

When we reached the Hombu Dojo, my mind set was clear. I was going to do my best. I had been faithfully training and I had prepared as much as I could, given the circumstances. The two-day testing was filled with repetitious drills and lots of kihon: punching, blocking, kicking, stances, sweeps and kumite drills. Countless bruises later, testing turned out not only to be physically grueling, but also mentally challenging. Part of what we had prepared for was not what we were asked to do. Instead of bassai dai and its bunkai, we were tested on pinan godan and its bunkai. Some of us were thrown for a loop, but I learned to adapt and go with the flow. At the end of the day, just as in life, if someone gives you a lemon, go ahead and make some lemonade. Soke chose to test us on pinan godan, so pinan godan it was. I tried my hardest and showed him my best.

Ultimately what this testing weekend showed me again was that I am fortunate to be part of such an exceptional dojo family. I thank the Gattey family for taking care of the children while we were testing. I thank the wonderful group of chefs for preparing the delectable huli-huli chicken meal for us. I thank my fellow karate-ka for training hard and never giving up. I thank my sensei for giving us skills, pushing our limits and recognizing our limitations. I am grateful for sensei stepping in after I was swept in kumite and down on the ground. I didn't trust myself not to get hurt, and I thank sensei for recognizing the

same. Lastly, I thank Soke Del Saito for awarding us with our new belts. We will continue to train hard and try to be better than yesterday.