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Being a martial artist has affected my life in so many ways. Since I was four years old I have been training, but shockingly, the most significant impact came after I earned my black belt, when I became an instructor. That is what made me understand what it truly meant to be a martial artist, not just physically, but mentally and spiritually.

My students mean the world to me. I have the responsibility to teach them not just how to protect themselves, but how to have the morals of a marital artist, and the weight of that responsibility is more apparent than the weight of any boulder could ever be. Ninety-nine percent of my students are kids between ages four and twelve. I am expected to teach them the most obvious martial arts skills such as: techniques, board breaking, sparring, forms, and of course, self-defense. That isn't all I am expected to teach them though.

Almost everyone knows that in most martial arts you wear belts, and when you get promoted you get a new color. Most people don't know what the belts symbolize. The knot in the center represents spirituality, the thing that ties a person together. One side represents physical ability to protect yourself and those around you, and the other side represents mental strength. I have always believed that my most important role is to teach my students the things that lead them towards mental strength, the things my martial arts instructor taught me. This includes listening to and respecting other people's opinions (even when they don't align with your own), showing kindness to everyone (even those with the harshest insults), and persevering to meet your goal (even when the option of giving up is so tempting).

Throughout my six years of teaching, I have had dozens and dozens of students. Four students whom I have helped train have earned their black belts in those six years, and one more is testing this spring. But no matter how long or short of a time they are with me, I try to teach all of my students something. I don't always know how much of what I say or show will stick with them, but I try. I try to be a positive role model, to show that they can be strong and confident,

but still kind. I have one student that I have been teaching since he was three, Meechie. He is eight now, and a really sassy little kid. He is definitely a handful to teach, and has a way of keeping me on my toes. He is the highest ranking student in his class right now, meaning that he is supposed to be setting a good example for his classmates. A couple of weeks ago he was misbehaving during a drill, and then one of the younger boys followed his lead and started to misbehave. I made Meechie turn his attention to the other kid and said, "Look, he is following your example. You are a role model to him. I just need you to understand that when you do this, when you set a bad example, it matters." Meechie took a second to process what I had said, and I was hoping that he would understand my words and start behaving better. He did more than that. He took the younger kid's hand and walked him over to the side of the room, bent down so that they were eye level, and talked to him. I don't know exactly what Meechie said, but the two boys came back to the drill and both of them acted with respect towards me and towards the other students for the rest of class. I don't even think it matters what exactly he said to him, I just remember the feeling of pure elation at Meechie's actions. I remember looking at the boy who has been my student for so long and thinking that in that moment, I had made a difference. I had helped him to learn and grow as a person.

I especially try to be a role model for my female students. I want to make sure these little girls have someone to show them that they can do anything just as well as any boy out there. I want to show them that they can wear dresses and heels, but still be tough and independent. I have more little girls in my classes right now than I have ever had before. The way they imitate me sometimes, the way they hug me every day before they leave class, and the way they ask me questions when they want my advice, it has all made it blatantly obvious that they listen and they pay attention to what I do. Knowing that, motivates me to make sure that what they say and hear is beneficial to them. One of my students, Sophia, was extremely shy when I met her. The other instructors and I knew that she was a really talented martial artist, and a really amazing person, so we pushed her to be more confident. We are still pushing her today, but it is more like a nudge now, because she has already come so far. She is assistant teaching the younger kids class, and she just earned her red belt. She was asked to work with two of the yellow stripes last week, and when I looked over I saw her say, "Zac, I know you can do this. I need you to look at the target, focus, and go through all the steps." The words themselves aren't really substantial in any way, she was doing what it took to get a student to understand a new technique. What really stunned

me was her tone. It was the first time I had ever seen her sound so sure of herself. She stated it in a way that demanded respect. She said it like a teacher, and because of that I couldn't help but smile.

I will be the first to admit that I make mistakes. I don't always set the best example. So when I mess up, I try to show my students that their imperfection is just another reason to work harder, and that mistakes are a part of life. I love teaching martial arts, not just because I love the sport, but because I love the lifestyle and above all else, I love my students, every single one. Whether I worked with them for a few weeks or a few years, I hope that I did everything I could to positively impact their lives. I hope that when they grow up, and when most of them inevitably stop training, they will still remember what they learned as a martial artist. I hope that I will get the opportunity to be at their graduation parties, their weddings, and maybe some baby showers. I hope that I will always get to be at least a small part of their lives, because they have been such a significant part of mine.