

Black belts run in their families

Hi-ya!

MacDonald's Academy of Martial Arts is at 32 Arsenal St. Visit bmdacademy.com for more information

When Josh Passell's two children started taking karate classes at the MacDonald Academy of Martial Arts a few years ago, Passell took on the common parental role of frequent audience member and personal cheerleader, shuttling the kids to and from classes and toting a camcorder to ceremonies and events. Though the founder of the academy, Brian MacDonald, often urged Passell to sign up for adult classes, the mid-40's dad was reluctant to join in the fun. After all, when you're a working parent, it's tough to muster the time and energy to do a physically and mentally demanding workout two or three times per week.

But MacDonald's persistence paid off, and Passell eventually did sign up for classes at the academy. Suddenly, Passell was no longer a detached observer of his kids' growing skills and strength – he was growing right along with them. Last Friday night marked a momentous occasion for both Passell, 48, and his daughter Eliza, 10: After years of intensive training, they both officially earned their black belts at one of MacDonald's locally famous "black belt spectacles."

At first, the name "spectacular" sounds a bit theatrical for a karate promotion ceremony. But with impressive demonstrations by all levels of students, touching tributes by MacDonald and food and a disc jockey to round out the excitement, the biannual event more than earns its name. MacDonald acts as emcee throughout the night, introducing the performing students, presenting new belts and explaining the finer points of the curriculum.

MacDonald, who is originally from Watertown, had his first experience with karate at an after school program when he was in third grade. He continued his martial arts training all the way through school and into adulthood, always keeping the dream of one day owning his own academy in the back of his mind. MacDonald opened his school at 32 Arsenal St. in 1992 without a single student signed up to attend his classes. Now, 14 years later, he has a total of 280 to 300 students at a time.

The academy generally runs on a three-month testing cycle for the various levels, or belts – white, yellow, orange, purple, blue, green, and brown. But the black belt test, being the final culmination of all that training, is offered only twice per year. MacDonald feels that holding a big event after the strenuous black belt test is the perfect way to celebrate his students' achievements.

"Although the event is focused on honoring those kids and adults who earned their black belts, we want to make it a real community activity," he said. "We promote all the kids from our classes at the ceremony, from the little ones all the way up through the teenagers and adults."

When he says, "little ones," MacDonald is referring to the academy's youngest class, the little dragons. The little dragons class includes children between 4 and 6 years old and offers a very basic introduction to karate ideologies and movements. From there, students move up to the beginner class (white, yellow and orange belts), followed by the intermediate class (purple, blue and green belts), and then on to the brown belt class. As a brown belt, a student's entire focus is on preparing for his or her black belt. "The black belt is a symbol of personal excellence," MacDonald said. "We always try to hold that

belt above all others as an ultimate goal."

While there certainly is a lot of physical training that goes into earning a black belt, MacDonald frequently reminds students that it takes more than a strong, agile body to truly achieve this goal. "We try to send a message to our students that becoming a black belt is not just about taking – it's about giving back," he said. To that end, MacDonald organizes group fund-raisers and gets his students involved in community events to support local charities. "Three years ago, my wife and I ran the Boston Marathon, and we ran it for Children's Hospital," he said. "We had the whole school get behind us, and we did all different things, like a break-a-thon for board breaking, to raise money."

During Friday's spectacular MacDonald discussed his brief running career as a way of elaborating on the black belt experience. "I'm not a runner. I ran the marathon, I crossed the finish line and I haven't run a day since," he said. "A black belt can be viewed the same way: You set the goal, you run the race and you pass the test. Then the question is, is it something that has become you, or is it something that you did once?"

While some students inevitably drop out of classes and move on to other sports and activities, others continue to pour their hearts and souls into the rigorous training it takes to reach that final objective. In addition to a grueling four-hour test for junior black belts and a six-hour test for adult black belts, all black belt students must also write a paper before they can complete the achievement. "We encourage them to research a different style of martial arts, or look deeply into their personal journey in martial arts," MacDonald said.

When it came time for Josh Passell to complete his writing

assignment, he decided to do something a little different. Having formerly worked as an editor for Delta Sky and Delta Shuttle magazines, Passell wrote a story for the magazines about his experience as an adult martial arts student. "I can't tell you how many phone calls I've gotten from people who flew Delta and read his article," MacDonald said proudly. "He's a great writer, and his story really captures the experience of martial arts training."

When MacDonald first set out to open his academy in the early 1990's, he had a revolutionary vision in mind. While most martial arts schools of the time focused either on the combative side, highlighting fighting and self-defense, or the sports side, centered on tournaments and competitions, MacDonald wasn't interested in either of those avenues. "My goal for the school was to create a community of families where we could all work together on developing character," he said. All these years later, with a wildly applauding audience before him at his latest spectacular, it's clear that MacDonald has accomplished the goal he holds most dear.