

Paul Brios

SMITH, Gloria

Karate senior breaking barriers

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At 72, Gloria Smith can take a punch.

She packs a good one, too.

The Mississauga senior received her black belt in karate on Sunday, making her the oldest person to accomplish this feat in the 28-year history of the Academy of Martial Arts, where she trains.

"They have a saying that your belt is the result. It's not the goal," said Smith.

She's no stranger to overcoming odds. Eight years ago, Smith was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent surgery and radiation to treat the disease.

She said that experience taught her to "try what you want to try now - you may not have another chance."

Smith retired from teaching at 65 and spent the next two years learning tai chi. But it was karate that really piqued her curiosity, so when the Academy of Martial Arts offered a promotion for an eight-week class, she signed up.

"I thought, what the heck do I have to lose?" she said. "At the end of the eight weeks I was hooked."

Still, she never aimed to achieve black belt, the 10th and highest belt rank in karate, let alone do it in just five years.

"The more I got into it, the more I realized that martial artists are more than just people who can take a punch and roll on the floor and stuff like that. It's a total way of life. You learn discipline, courtesy, respect," she said. "I really wanted this journey. The journey was the cake. The black belt was the icing."

Ian Jay, Smith's head instructor, said she trained almost daily with people mostly in their 20s through 40s.

"Nobody ever once said to me, 'You're too old.' Nobody ever once said, 'You can't keep up,'" said Smith, admitting, though, that her classmates probably didn't expect much from her. But she showed them.



Seventy-two year-old Gloria Smith was one of the black belt recipients in ceremonies held at the Academy of Martial Arts in Meadowvale on Sunday. Here, she gets her belt from Renshi Ian Jay. Rob Beintema/Metroland

"And they showed me," she said. "This is what I like. It's a two-way street; you learn to work hard as an individual. You learn to work as part of a team. You learn to help others and they help you."

Jay said Smith's accomplishment is uncommon for someone of her age.

"There's nobody who's achieved their first-degree black belt in their 70s within our schools, so that's very rare," Jay said. "This was new territory. She's doing something that no one else has done."

There are about 3,000 students enrolled in the academy's schools.

"The misconception about the martial arts is that it's only for young people. It has so much to offer people of all ages," he said.

"She was never afraid to try new things.

She really is the example for anybody doing anything - who think that if they're too old, they can't do it - that they can."

Smith also lives with daily pain from her arthritis. It would have been easy for her to make excuses for not staying active. Instead, she has decided not to set limits for herself.

"Other than walking and hiking, I have the least amount of coordination of any person I know, truly," she quipped.

Smith celebrated her achievement with husband Ray and son Mike. But her journey isn't finished just yet. She'll continue training to move up the degrees of black-belt status.

"For me, it's not over. So long as I can still train, I will continue to do so," Smith said. "I just want to go as far as I can go. The day I stop learning is the day I start to die."