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Talking to Karate Champion Fatemeh Arabshahi

Karate is an international language

By Kat Avila

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Fatemeh Arabshahi is a former national karate champion for the Republic of Iran. This master teacher was the first woman to be granted a Certificate of Commission, as an international lead representative, at the 1997 Okinawa Karate and Kobudo World Tournament in Okinawa, Japan, and still regularly wins gold and silver medals in international tournaments. She opened her own karate school at the age of 20, and is ranked in the top one-percent of those who practice the Isshin-ryu style of karate.



Arabshahi wrote, directed, and performed in a karate-related play EMPTY HANDS -- first produced in Tehran, Iran, in 2001 -- to empower Iranian women who were seeing their freedoms increasingly repressed under a conservative religious regime. (Indeed, she spent time in prison for her political beliefs.) EMPTY HANDS was the first Iranian play to have an entirely female cast, but its message is not just for women: The power for positive self-development and social change lies within one's grasp. The Japanese word "karate" is associated with "empty hands," and its sports philosophy promotes the latent power held within those hands.

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K: Kat Avila for LatinoLA

F: Fatemeh Arabshahi, master karate teacher

K: When and where did you take your first karate class?

F: I took my first class at the Shirodi Sports Complex in Tehran when I was ten years old.

K: Before that you did gymnastics, so who convinced you to try karate?

F: My brother took me to a class and registered me. At first, I was scared and started crying because there were many people shouting and making noise. Suddenly a nice man approached me and helped me put on my uniform and belt correctly.

He started teaching me in a playful manner. His name was Jong-yang "Sabum" [Instructor] Kim. I started with taekwondo. Later, after he left Iran, I changed my style to karate.

K: You hold a black belt, 6th Dan, with 10th Dan being the highest. How does one get promoted to the next dan [black belt rank] after earning the black belt?

F: After the black belt, the process of perfecting your learned techniques starts. Gaining more balance, speed, and experience is part of it, as is broadening your horizon of knowledge and creativity.

K: What is the significance of the belt colors?

F: There are nine "kyus" or steps to reach black belt, the first black belt is called "shodan," 1st Dan. These nine kyu are separated into colors, that is, white, yellow, orange, green, blue, brown, and black. Sometimes stripes are on the belts to show a higher ranking within a specific color. Different [martial arts] styles use different coloring systems. But the same for all is the colors get darker for each test you pass.

The philosophy is that like a child is born as a pure white soul and gets more and more knowledge and information as it grows, "karatekas" [karate practitioners] also start pure and white, gaining a lot of power and knowledge over the years until receiving the black belt, the

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darkest color of all.

After that, the dans are shown as stripes on the belt. Traditional karate uses white stripes with the goal of getting back to the human's "pure" existence. The difference from a child is that the pureness is based on knowledge and wisdom instead. It is the karateka's choice how to use his power.

K: Is there an ideal age for a child to enroll in a karate class?

F: Personally I believe the ideal age is four years old.

K: Karate can provide positive role models and teach children to respect their bodies, but can it really help children to protect themselves against school bullies?

F: Eventually. It takes time for children to start believing in themselves and to be able to use this belief as a shield against bullies. It takes a lot of patience and effort not only for the child but also for the parents and the "sensei" [teacher].

K: In a fight between a professional boxer and a black belt at your level, who would win and why?

F: Boxers normally have more power and speed in their arms and hands, and in karate you use both your hands and legs. That's why karatekas are lighter in their movements.

But the result of a fight between these two depends on the distance. Boxers try to get close to the opponent, whereas the karateka moves out. Whoever wins the approach of distance, wins the fight.

K: You first opened your school in Tehran. How long have you had your dojo [training hall] in California?

F: Since August 2005.

K: What are your current karate-related projects?

F: My book on the physics of karate, and organizing a "kobudo" [traditional weaponry] workshop for instructors in Istanbul, Turkey.

K: How do you prepare for a tournament?

F: Practice, practice, and relax.

K: Are you planning to eventually return to Iran?

F: Yes, I am. I would like to open up an educational center in Iran for underprivileged citizens. For now, I continue my writing and karate.

K: What would you like LatinoLA readers to remember most?

F: Self-belief, the power to say "no," don't be afraid to break traditions and move along with time, surpass your present capabilities, and break out of your own prison and live as a free human being with love.

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About Kat Avila :
A freelance writer covering the cultural and geographic landscapes of Southern California.
Email the author

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