

## **Black Belt Thesis**

### **“How American Kenpo Karate Has Helped Heal Emotional Trauma “**

**By Christina Vallesillas**



"The role American Kenpo Karate plays in healing emotional and physical abuse..."

Anytime Master Chavez asks me to introduce myself I always start with "I was the shy quiet one sitting in the corner." It's true. I was shy and quiet, but it was more than that. I was traumatized in every way you could think of and terrified to want anything for myself. I didn't trust people. I had barely any sense of self worth, or personal power. Before I can tell you how American Kenpo and the people of E. C. K. K. I. helped me heal, I have to tell you my back story and how trauma affects the body, and mind.

"We have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past. It is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body. This imprint has ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present. Trauma results in a fundamental reorganization of the way the mind and brain manage perceptions. It changes not only how we think and what we think about, but also our very capacity to think."

- Bessel A. Van Der Kolk, The Body Keeps The Score

My earliest memories are of neglect and abuse. Every type of abuse you can think of is what my childhood was made of...from multiple sources. The details aren't needed here, but the lessons learned are.

I learned to be quiet and very still, seen but not heard, and only seen when someone wanted something from me. I learned I was put on this earth for other people's needs and wants. I learned that I wasn't worthy. It wasn't enough. I wasn't capable. I learned I wasn't allowed to have needs or wants. I wasn't allowed to set a boundary, to stand up for myself, to say "No". If I did I'd be ignored and they would take what they wanted anyways. Or slap me down and punish me for trying to set those boundaries. All of the patterns continued into my adulthood. I learned to shrink myself, to not trust the words or actions of others because I had been hurt in so many ways by so many people.

Through scientific research by people like Dr. Bessel Van Der Kolk, author of "The Body Keeps The Score" and Dr. Nicole Lapera, author of "How To Do The Work", we know trauma and stress can show up in the physical body as well. Mine has shown up in extra pounds, Sciatica, and other unexplained severe pain in the lower body. When the body doesn't feel safe, it will let you know. "Being able to feel safe with other people is probably the single most important aspect of mental health; Safe connections are fundamental to meaningful and satisfying lives."

- Bessel A. Van der Kolk, The Body Keep's The Score

"Trauma victims cannot recover until they become familiar with and befriend the sensations in their bodies. Being frightened means that you live in a body that is always on guard. Angry people live in angry bodies. The bodies of child-abuse victims are tense and defensive until they find a way to relax and feel safe. In order to change, people need to become aware of their sensations and the way that their bodies interact with the world around them. Physical self-awareness is the first step in releasing the tyranny of the past. The mind needs to be reeducated to feel physical sensations, and the body needs to be helped to tolerate and enjoy the comforts of touch. Individuals who lack emotional awareness are able, with practice, to connect their physical sensations to psychological events. Then they can slowly reconnect with themselves."

- Bessel A. Van der Kolk, The Body Keeps The Score

Total body awareness is a tool that every Martial artist should have. Through practicing American Kenpo Karate it became a must for me to befriend my physical body. American Kenpo has given me the tools I need to defend myself physically. The confidence to know that I can handle myself in any confrontation.

What I never expected was the acceptance I would receive from the first day that I stepped on the mat. No judgement, just help and kindness. I never expected the affection of the people on the mats with me. They've become my second family. I was more than good enough. Through them I learned I was more than worthy, my voice mattered. I was allowed, encouraged to set boundaries. I learned that the boundaries I set could be respected. My voice has become louder in the last 4 years than it ever has been before. I take up space without apology. I now have what I call my "Black Belt Energy"

That force within me that I tap into to feel confident and sure of myself. I've gone from hiding to leading. Keeping quiet to using my voice. Spectating to living. This is not the end, only the beginning.

I will be forever grateful to Senior Professor Edward Chavez for creating a safe place for so many of us to learn and grow not only in this amazing martial art , but also within and together. Forever grateful to guest instructors such as Mr. Chuck McGowan who gives freely of his time and knowledge. To my husband who knew who I was before and still loved me, and who has watched who I've become and still loves me. I'll be forever grateful to my kenpo sisters and brothers who came before me and after me and opened their hearts and minds. During this journey, I walked it with my son practicing together, encouraging each other, and never allowing each other to give up. I'm grateful for having him with me every step of the way. This is not just my black belt, but all of ours.

"Healing rarely comes without difficulty. It's painful at times and terrifying, too. It means letting go of narratives that hold you back and harm you. It means letting a part of you die so another can be reborn."

- Dr. Nicole La Pera, How To Do The Work