



Karate instructor Don Owens poses in a photo that has special meaning to him. “It’s one of my favourites as the black belt I am wearing was given to me by Shimoda Sensei (8th dan) of the Osaka police department special forces,” Owens says. “It has my name in English on one side and Osaka police on the other, in Kanji.” (submitted photo)

KARATE MASTER

As a rare 9th-degree black belt, Surrey senior still gets kicks teaching karate – and learning

Former Vancouver cop Don Owens involved in martial arts for 54 years

In the world of karate, Don Owens has earned more black belts than most others who are alive and kicking.

The Surrey resident, a master of the martial art, has practised karate for more than five decades, and still teaches at a dojo in Langley.

“I’ve been at it since 1965, so we’re looking at around 54 years now,” Owens recalled.

As a rare ninth-degree black belt, or dan, with World JKA karate association and others, he’s still at the top of his game.

"In this organization, the JKA," he said, "the highest at one time was a ninth-degree black belt, because you can't get your 10th until you die, so I don't want the 10th," he explained with a laugh.

"Some of the rules have changed a bit, but ninth, to me, is the highest while you're still alive."

During his 71 spins around the sun, Owens has also earned a significant number of certificates, awards and accolades from several karate associations around the globe, and has learned from some masters of the martial art.

Twice a week, as chief instructor, Owens brings those Shotokan karate skills and knowledge to a dojo in Langley operated by World JKA's Canadian division, in the R.C. Garnett school gym at 7096 201st St.

It's a long way from East Vancouver, where Owens grew up, grew to love karate and also worked as a police officer, starting in 1981 and ending with a 28-year career with the VPD.

"I was about 33 when I joined the police force," he explained, "so when I got out of the academy, I started the police dojo a year later, around 1982.

"I just wanted to get the police (officers) involved, and a number of them joined and worked their way through, right up to black belt," Owens added, proudly.

In those days, he worked in Chinatown and the Downtown Eastside, among other beats, and grew familiar with the gangs and thugs who frequented the area.

Earlier, on the mean streets of the mid-'60s, learning karate was a no-brainer for Owens.

"Well, I grew up in East Van – that says it all right there," he said with a laugh. "We got into lots of scraps and so forth, so I started off looking for a better way. I was always successful but you know, you always get hurt somehow when you're fighting people, but I was looking for something where maybe I didn't get hurt so much, you know. I looked at everything – kung fu, different karate styles, but they didn't really suit my personality, but then I found my instructor now, Hiroo Yamashiro, and that was it.

"The interesting part is," he added, "I was fortunate to train with some of the great masters that started the JKA, like (Jun) Sugano and Nakayama (Masatoshi), the head of it, and with (Tetsuhiko) Asai, their technical director. Most people

may not know these names but, you know, anybody in the karate world sure does.”

Today, Owens is vice-president of World Japan Karate Association, and takes seriously his role of teaching others.

“Years ago an instructor said to me, you have to understand that you’re getting older and you have to pass it on and take that responsibility,” Owens explained. “And really now I understand that relationship, as a senior person you need the credentials to be able to grade people and have them respect it. I started to accept that over time.”

At age 71, Owens remains active in the dojo but, like anyone, he’s not as young as he used to be.

“I thought I was 21 the other day so I’m limping a little bit today,” he said recently.

“I still have a group of students,” Owens continued, “and one thing I always tell them is, it’s great to have all the accolades and certificates and be accepted by your peers – wonderful, actually – but karate is the practice, and so I still practice every single day. I have a small dojo upstairs in my house, and so I’m there a lot.

“As for teaching, the rule is, for every hour you teach you should put two hours of practice in, going over it, and you have to do that. I still put in an hour every day, but sometimes I end up doing two hours or more, just because you get into it, and I love it. You have to learn, because you can get sloppy. I have a group of friends and we still get together and practice, and every week one person has the job to criticize everybody else, and we all have input. The problem is, once you get to my rank, nobody wants to criticize you. That’s just the culture of karate.”