

## **Is black belt next? Asked the street kid tying his new yellow belt?**

by Mark Kennedy

I managed to keep a straight face while replying, No, there are a few colors in between. The naiveté amused me. Yet in fairness, this group of 25 newly-minted yellow belts had been promoted in record time, just six weeks. It had been a special summer program for kids just out of juvenile hall, or expelled from district schools. An experiment.

So, I could see how they might think the whole process would be collapsed. On the other hand, I'd worked them two solid hours a day, four days a week, hour-for-hour at least the equivalent of a traditional program's three one-hour classes a week for 3-6 months. There was no gimme to it. This kid had conveniently forgotten all the hard work they'd done, although some of the kids around him, still sore, stiff, and blistered-burst into laughter at his question.

Yet I sensed a dark side to this mirthful moment as we stood in the afterglow of our hard-won achievement. Sure, on the surface this student's comment appeared to be merely a neophyte's inexperience. But 16 years of working with street-savvy kids kept me from dismissing the pall which had fallen. What was it?

The unsettling feeling lasted a day or two before I could articulate it. And it was this: there was a dangerous assumption underlying the kid's basic outlook on life. Too often adolescents who have been cut off for long periods from traditional routes to success begin to look for shortcuts. They may feel like failures in one or more areas of their lives: school, socially, sports, dating, or maybe shame over their family or home situation. As I thought it over, the conviction grew that this boy may have actually believed there was an available shortcut. And that was worrisome. Because I've found that the more kids find themselves feeling on the outs from success, the more such shortcuts will seem acceptable, even normal.

So what might I take from this episode to make me better at working with and helping kids? I believe this street-wized teen learned that he would have to work for his martial arts achievements (and maybe others as well) but also that he could be successful by doing so. He didn't need a shortcut. He was capable. And as simple as this sounds, there are many, many teens out there who don't believe they are capable. They may appear normal to adults, or even peers, but many teens feel a sense of deep failure in one or more area of life. What a great challenge "and opportunity" for those of us who work with them, whether in the martial arts studio, the classroom, a church or civic setting, or across the dinner table.

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