



Episode 408 – Shihan Beth Bielat | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com



Jeremy Lesniak:

Hello and welcome back or, maybe for the first time, to whistlekick martial arts radio. This is episode 408. Today, I'm joined by Shihan Beth Bielat. I'm Jeremy Lesniak. I'm your host for the show, I'm the founder of whistlekick and martial arts is the thing that I do pretty much all the time, in one form or another, and that's why whistlekick is my job. Part of my job is hosting this show twice a week. We give you this and every other episode for free so check that out, whistlekickmartialartsradio.com, and head on over to whistlekick.com and maybe you want to show some love. Buy a shirt or hoodie, maybe some gear or uniform, we got a lot of stuff over there and you can use the code PODCAST15, that will save you 15% off everything. I'm writing new stuff all the time so, if it's been more than a month since you've been there, check out the site. Of course, we do have a lot of our stuff, not all of it but quite a bit of it to Amazon but Amazon eats up that 15% so no code there but you still get free shipping and make it more convenient for you so check that out. I have no idea how to do this intro. I'll be really honest. I started martial arts, as long-time listeners know, at the age of 4 at a small town in Maine and the person I started training with is my guest today. Shihan Beth Bielat who, of course, was sensei. Her and her husband had opened a small martial arts school in a small town that I happened to live in. it was the early '80s, I didn't know what was going on but here we are now, quite a few years later, we're both still training and I recently had the opportunity to sit down so we could talk about this because this interview is important. It was important to me because as we chronicle the stories of martial artists, there are a handful that is personally important to me and she's on that list so as we go through, hopefully, you'll



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see some of the roots of how I came to be who I am as a martial artist. It's a good story. Hope you enjoy it! Shihan Bielat, welcome to whistlekick martial arts radio.

Beth Bielat:

Thank you, Jeremy, it's a pleasure to be here with you.

Jeremy Lesniak:

We should probably let the audience know...I can't even talk...already laughing and the fact that this is going to be kind of different, probably, than any other episode that I've done in that you have known me for a very, very long time.

Beth Bielat:

Very long time.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Let me set kind of the picture for the audience. We're sitting at your tiny table at your home in Northern Maine. We just got done training with you and Shihan John and a bunch of other people, former black belts and just working on beating on each other as we...there was an intermission there, as we can say, we did for a very long time a while ago and so, I've talked about this a little bit on this show that we've reconnected and how great that's been but now we're talking about your story. It's kind of neat.

Beth Bielat:

Yes, it is. It's fun to be here.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Cool, alright. I know we're going to go on some different directions. We're probably going to go to some different directions than we've done on the show before because of our personal relationship but let's give the audience some context and go back so how did you first start training?

Beth Bielat:

I started training when I was in 4th grade and I started because my older brother, Mike, started and I adored him and so, got to spend time with him. Get out of the house and be with just him and, interestingly enough, it was an adult class because he was a little bit older than me and he talked me into going one day and I was the only girl and I was the only kid and they didn't allow kids. I don't know if they didn't allow girls at the time and so, it's really interesting because the instructor just kind of took to me. Even back then, I think I had a sense of discipline that I think he picked up on and he told me a few things to do in class and I was doing what the adults were doing and so, just fell in love with it. Mark stopped after a few years, I think he got his green belt. I think it was in Shitō-ryū and he went off to



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college and I stayed and it was a recreation department kind of class and a gentleman named Ron Debuque was the instructor and then he left and a gentleman, Sensei Marty Katz, came through and stayed with him and received my Shodan, my black belt, when I was 18.

Jeremy Lesniak:

You mentioned a sense of discipline and maybe you fit in in that group better than a lot of others might have at your age and given your background, where did that come from? Was it other sports? The way you were raised?

Beth Bielat:

I think that sometimes we're just born with some spiritual DNA that kind of puts you into a place that I was fortunate to find my love and passion coincidentally and so early and something that had so much discipline in it that I just fell in love with that. I mean, I did some other sports but nothing held my attention or my love like that and so, it rocked my world.

Jeremy Lesniak:

What were your expectations going in?

Beth Bielat:

I didn't know what it was. I didn't know what Karate was.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Have you seen anything in movies, nothing to give you even...?

Beth Bielat:

It had to be 1969-ish so I don't even know if I had seen any martial arts movies. We sure wrestled a lot and when the word 'fighting' came in and being able to do that in maybe a more formal way, I went oh, this is pretty cool and I think something that may have come up then that, I think is good to mention, is I don't know why my experience has been this. I think it's because we sometimes teach people how we want to be treated and from day one, as a girl and now, a woman in the martial arts, I, without very many exceptions that I can think of, I was always treated with such great respect and maybe, other women have a different experience but my experience has been the men and women, later on women came into the play, always honored what we did and respected it and that was a piece of the discipline and I liked the ritual around that and I just really felt at home there.

Jeremy Lesniak:

One of the things I find interesting, anybody that starts martial arts up and continues, obviously, is that there was something that kept them there. It wasn't that you had some expectation started and found



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that that expectation was met and that's something that kept you in but, at some point, you found something that so deeply resonated with you that here you are, years later, it's still important, it's still a passion, it's still, we might even say is, the most fundamental thing to who you are. What was that thing that kept you?

Beth Bielat:

I really like to work hard. I mean, in anything that I've ever done, I love to work hard and I think it gave me a canvas to do that and then, fast forward a little bit, there's a bunch of years in between, and then, at 16, I met my husband John so that's almost a long time ago. We're heading towards our 40th wedding anniversary, been in martial arts, we're heading towards my 50th anniversary or at my 50th anniversary so I think, and another piece of the puzzle too, was the friendships. We didn't have a great home life so to be out 3 nights a week and, back then, so this all happened in New Jersey originally and so, even at a young age, when I was probably, I maybe started when I was 13 or 14, we'd have class 6 to 7:30 and we all went out every night out and we'd have a late dinner and I had people that would drive me and drop me off, pick me up so there as a real camaraderie in there too that was pretty special and different from my school friends, little more maturity, I think, was in those relationships.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Do you think they were looking at you as kind of the kid sister? I feel like I can ask this now because I know that it did not remain the case but they kind of let things slide with you being younger and being a girl?

Beth Bielat:

Oh no. Oh no, it was tough. Back then, we train hard and, if that's what you mean, the training part of it, oh, no, no, no. I have been blessed with a strong body and a strong will and there was no gear, pretty gosh darn full contact, except to the face, we worked hard so no, there wasn't that. It was pretty hardcore, I think, even at a young age, and I think I liked that. That was the part that I liked, that I wasn't babied at all.

Jeremy Lesniak:

What did the people around you think of that because I'm sure if you're training 3 nights a week going that hard, you're coming out with bruises and bangs and...

Beth Bielat:

Oh yes, we did. My forearm used to look like rotten bananas sometimes. I don't remember my parents being upset about that. It was part of it but I remember, back then too, after a year or two, there's only a few kids in the whole middle school or high school that was, I was the Karate girl. People knew that I was involved in that so, yes, it was good.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

Cool and so, you said you met your husband through martial arts. Of course, I know some of this story but listeners don't so how did that happen?

Beth Bielat:

So, we didn't have a...we're a recreation program and my instructor was the president of the USKA in New Jersey at the time and John's sensei was the vice president and so, they met and we really loved visiting other dojos. We competed too. I think they even met through competition and that was back in the old days when there was some really, really wonderful competitors and so, we would visit dojos. Remember the day I was 16, we went to their dojo in Jamesburg, New Jersey and I watched him fight for the first time and maybe, you believe in love at first sight, maybe you don't, but I watched this man pummel everything. I saw bodies flying through the air and went, that's him. I couldn't imagine having been in a serious relationship with somebody I could beat up. That was part of it but later on, we had so much in common. Not just martial arts. We're both outdoors enthusiasts and think a lot in the same ways but, interestingly enough, we visited each other a lot from my age of 16 to 18 and he was a gentleman and we never dated until I turned 18 because he's...when I was 16, he was 20 so that was good.

Jeremy Lesniak:

When the two of you did start dating, was there any kind of response from anyone? Did anyone weigh in on that? we just had an episode, I don't know if you listened to it, I talked about dating in the martial arts that ruffled some feathers so I'm curious what...

Beth Bielat:

We're from 2 different schools so actually, we both had dated other people during those years and the response was everybody wanted us to be together so I went off to college at 18 down to Florida and came back. It was my birthday and my boyfriend was supposed to show up, John showed up instead and I called my boyfriend, told him not to come, John was there and I remember the first time we kissed, we were outside of an apartment and he kissed me goodnight and I looked up and everybody was out on the balcony at the apartment and they start cheering so it was pretty [00:13:42]

Jeremy Lesniak:

Was it a Karate party?

Beth Bielat:

It was a Karate party. Everyone was really cheering.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So that was the moment.



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Beth Bielat:

Yes, it was.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And what's it been like, you mentioned, similar perspectives on training? Obviously, I, again, know a lot more about that, having lived through it and grown up in it but what was that like early on?

Beth Bielat:

It was interesting because so, we got married when I was 20 and we took off so really, we had no formal instructors from that time. We train for those years, got our Shodans, got our black belts then and we took off to New Mexico, had a small school there and moved to Maine where we met you and so, coming from 2 different styles and being very self-motivated, it was interesting. There was a time when we were experimenting a lot. I love katas and John didn't love katas as much so how much kata do we do? We both love to fight. We both love basics so there was a lot of good stuff that came out of that. My personality is he says black, I say white and I say, okay, I'll try black for a while. You know what I mean? I'm pretty fluid that way and he's become fluid in that way too so, I think our students benefitted from the 2 of us coming together and creating our own space fast forward 40 more years.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Now, one of the questions that comes up quite often about martial arts with other people is what style do you do and that was a question that, honestly, I always struggled to answer because it was a longer conversation because I had to give a little bit of background. Well, there are two instructors...so when you went to New Mexico and you had a small school, people, inevitably, would ask what are we doing or what do you teach and what do you train in? How would you answer them then?

Beth Bielat:

Back then, we would say that we are... I use the word bastardized style. John grew up in Isshin-ryū. I grew up in kind of bastardized style of kind of Kyoshin. We did a lot of the Pinion katas, we did the Isshin-ryū katas and the students always learned both katas and that explanation would be those 2 things. Since then, we've morphed a lot and changed a lot but that back then, that's what we'd explain.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And in that time, was that weird or did people push back on that?

Beth Bielat:

Oh gosh no. I think, when somebody comes into a school, they don't know differently. They don't know that every school doesn't do that. The only people that know that that's not normal are people who've



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done martial arts for a long time that usually train in one style but nowadays, my goodness, how many people that have been doing martial arts for 15 years have just done one thing?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Pretty rare. Pretty rare at even 5 years. Seems to be the marketing du jour is here are all the different things that you can learn here. Put them all together and a master can make jokes about it. So, you moved into New Mexico, not any formal instruction, I think was the word you used, you guys moved to Maine. I had some vague memories, being that I was 4, what that looked like but I'm curious of the thought process because I heard you talk about this a little bit and, if I remember correctly, it was we just wanted people to train with but there must've been more than that because it was far more organized in your career at the time and a huge part of both of your lives. It was beyond just wanting people to train with. What was it? What was the thought process? What was the why? That's a better way to put it.

Beth Bielat:

I think the original why for all of our schools is to have people to work out with, to train with. That's part of the why but I think we had some success and, let's see, that was...we opened the school in Maine in '83 and we were the only school in the area. Found out that I kind of like teaching kids and I loved the adult class and that it was starting to make it into a business, a lifestyle, making some money doing it. It was my life, there was my work but we also had other work too. John was a contractor et cetera. Same idea, though, from the beginning is that it became our friends, it became our life, it became our social life and at one point, we were training 5 days a week, teaching in 6 different school systems and it got busy and it was good and so, that was kind of the why of why we stayed in that for so long.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Was it ever too much?

Beth Bielat:

I don't mind being busy. During that time, we had some children born and I'm fortunate that I get up very early in the morning so, at that time in my life, I was probably getting up at 3 AM. You're doing with live stuff. Doing my own training, working on construction the whole day and taking care of family then training all those afternoons and nights so, is that too much? I sure loved it. I still love being busy.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, it doesn't seem like, obviously, there are a lot of logistical changes, a lot of semantic changes in your life now but it seems to be pretty similar.

Beth Bielat:



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Yes, well, I love being busy.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Okay, cool. When you think back on that time, and really, I guess we can say, any time. There are lots of stories. I've heard tons of stories and I'm not going to pretend which one or ones you want to share but the way I usually articulate this to guests is what are your favorite stories or what's your favorite story from your time in the martial arts that you might want to share with the listeners?

Beth Bielat:

I think with this venue, what I would like to share with the listeners, is a little bit about you.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I had a feeling this would happen. Honestly, this is not something that we talked about. We haven't planned anything other than we were going to do this so I'm hearing this for the first time as everyone else is.

Beth Bielat:

So, part of why I picked this as my favorite story for this venue is how proud that John are of you and how many lives you're changing and, you know they say, if you can influence or have one or two friends...

Jeremy Lesniak:

I know where you're going.

Beth Bielat:

...in a lifetime, look at what you've done and some of my favorite young stories from you, when Jeremy was 4, I think I've heard him say this, actually on the show, when he was 4, he came into class and that's when we decided no one was allowed to start until they were 6 and Jeremy had a big head of hair and giant eyes and he didn't know what Karate was. He didn't know what was going on.

Jeremy Lesniak:

All of those things have changed. I have no hair, I know what Karate is and my eyes are much more proportional.

Beth Bielat:

But he came all the time. He had a mom that brought him to every class and got him very involved and he was extremely smart and so, if you teach and you have somebody that's really smart in your class, you have to keep them moving and one of my first memories of Jeremy was looking up at the, we had a



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giant gym, big basketball gym, it was a very disciplined class. Lots of strong basics and he's looking up at the ceiling and finally, I'm Jeremy, what are you doing? What are you looking at? And he was counting the tiles and doing the multiplication of 27 tiles across and I think 43 and he was doing the multiplication of that and that's when this brain thing went on to me like Ding! I got to keep this kid busy and we've talked about we do 10 front kicks in 1 direction, 10 front kicks in the other. Keep it going, keep it going, keep it moving and another favorite memory when the kids were really young was we would have celebrations. Whether it was a holiday party or we did a kickathon, we raised a lot of money for St. Jude's and one of the things we would do, it was a basketball court and the kids were given popcorn and they had to go on their hands and knees and go from one side of the court to the other and raise and push the popcorn with their nose. I remember our son, Shawn, was involved in the martial arts, as well, and I remember Jeremy and Shawn were ahead of time. You had to replace the popcorn because it would disintegrate and I remember you guys going, going, going. All of a sudden, look up and Jeremy's got the popcorn in his nostril and I'm pretty sure he won but I don't think, it really wasn't cheating.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I beat the system!

Beth Bielat:

We didn't really say you couldn't do that but he beat the system. That's how smart he was and another really great thing that happened to that that was very enjoyable to watch was Jeremy was a good student in class, then the tournament thing happened. I remember the first time that I saw him compete, I turned to my husband John and I said, who was that? He became Bruce Lee in a moment and that's when, I think and you can correct me, that's when something really clicked for you. Something happened in tournaments. Both kata and sparring. I remember a kata, just remember watching you doing kata and just going wow and the side to this is, because John and I's lives were so busy and I'm a mover and seating at a tournament for long hours is not something that we did a lot of, so you guys were self-motivated and went to all those tournaments and did the circuit and I think it's life-changing so when people ask me about tournaments, whether they're good or bad or for some people, they're life-changing. They're amazing.

Jeremy Lesniak:

God, I have some memories of that time and, feeling like for the first time, I was able to so concretely correlate after with results that there was this sort of objective determinant. Still, it's martial arts. It's a competition and primarily, it was kata. For me, where I really felt I enjoyed myself and thrived which is still subjective but I could talk to the judges after and get their feedback and work on things and go back and do it again and that was really motivating.

Beth Bielat:



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I think it also put you in the dojo a lot more. You were training hard for that. You trained hard, for instance, for your black belt and all that but I know that that made you do all that extra time and I think there's something special about training alone, on your own or one on one with one of the instructors to improve your sparring, as opposed to class time and so, that was important too.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It gave me an identity. I was no longer Jeremy, the awkward kid who happened to do martial arts with a bunch of other kids who were less awkward and more popular and everything. I had something that I could point to and say, this is my thing. It wasn't, to everybody outside of martial arts, martial arts was my thing but to everybody in the martial arts, we had that together so it got more narrow with competition so that was my thing.

Beth Bielat:

And I think you enjoyed the camps as well but I think tournaments more so for you. Some people, it was the camps but for you, I think, definitely.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It's funny that's what flipped now. Now, it's travelling around and meeting people and doing all that. You talked about you took me on at 4, nobody else until 6 and we could make jokes about that but there's some very real stuff in there. Today, we talk a lot about martial arts, martial arts for kids and what age is appropriate and junior black belts and there's a whole pile of stuff but, what I'm curious of, because you were teaching kids for probably 98% of the people teaching martial arts to kids today were so you saw things on the front edge, before anybody else, you were creating and learning these principles, trial by fire, that a lot of people just get to learn or read in a book or go through a certification or whatever, what was your philosophy on children and how did that, very clearly, changed from Day One which was 4, sure, we'll try it to hmm, no, no, we need X, we need to be beyond such and such line?

Beth Bielat:

I think, today, they have some wonderful programs for 4 and 5 year olds. They're half an hour long and they play. They roll and they hit stuff and that wasn't the idea then. We didn't play. We did real Karate with 6 year olds and so, I honored those systems. I think that's a great thing to have 4 and 5 year old programs. I think that what I've seen in the past is, I didn't have a role model because the classes I trained in didn't have kids. We visited other schools as adults and I don't know if I ever saw a kids' class so we taught it and we learned as we went and I also wasn't a gal who did any babysitting as a kid so I wasn't around kids so you figured out that hey, if I face them these way and we do 10 punches this way and then, all of a sudden looking at the side of the basketball court is a whole 'nother thing and so, I think that we did a good job but I think some people are doing amazing jobs now where they have a real curriculum and we've talked about how, a lot of times, martial arts schools aren't like other businesses



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and so, they have wonderful business plans where there's these after school programs where they're picking the kids up and et cetera and it's amazing that they've got great program going. So, whole 'nother subject about the junior black belts is I'd never heard of such a thing and I'm torn in today's world that we can't wait like we have to promote those kids because we got to promote them because it's our business too and that keeps them involved and I think perhaps, it has to do with what our definition of what a black belt is. In my opinion, a black belt holds a lot more than being able to do 7 katas and certain basics. There's a maturity, a responsibility, a discipline that I don't think a 10-year old has. Someone can have a completely different opinion and I get that, I'm just saying I believe this is how I would teach if I was teaching kids at this time again. I think our youngest black belt has been 16 so that's the way I feel.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Was that ever discussed when you were coming up with...?

Beth Bielat:

No. No.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Was what a black belt was defined?

Beth Bielat:

We had our definitions but, not necessarily, a written definition or what we would watch students, again, it wasn't a curriculum. You would watch someone and go, you've taken those steps. Let's say, you do beautiful katas. In our school, when green and brown, so you're a green belt, you're doing beautiful katas and you know what? They're starting to look like brown belt katas. They're starting to have the components that, in our eyes, made you so you could have those, let's say, [00:31:53] you can have those [00:31:56] katas but if they don't start looking like a brown belt kata in our school, you're not going to be promoted to brown belt. Time is a piece of the puzzle but, at some point, you still have to have quality. In our school, you had to be able to fight. You couldn't just do kata or vice versa. You have to, at least, perform to a certain expectation which I guess was biased or our opinion. Not biased, but our opinion.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, I think it's always biased. Right? Everybody's got their own opinion. When you think back to your very early days teaching, that's early Maine, New Mexico, whatever, to when you and John stepped away from the school and you sold the school, what was the biggest thing, if we were to look at those two bookends of that period of time in the way that you approached teaching?

Beth Bielat:



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Are you saying that was different from the beginning to the end?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, yeah, what changed the most in, either philosophy or the way you would organize classes or any of that?

Beth Bielat:

I don't know that it changed that much. I think we always held to our quality. I think that our style of teaching, I mean, as far as what we were teaching, I think that, as we progressed and we were learning new things, I'm a big fan of, and I think you are too probably, you know you go to a camp and the next day, you're teaching what you just learned because it was so cool and you loved it so we started incorporating different things. We started picking up more weapons. We did more grappling. We started to teach the advanced fighting. That was a really big thing for our school, I think, was as we grew up, we kind of did 2 different types of fighting. We did point sparring for tournaments and things like that and then you did self-defense and we started doing this continuous, anything goes fighting that we did slow to learn body mechanics and incorporate anything that anybody knows because we used to have a lot of black belts from other schools come and train with us and people with lots of experience and I think that set us apart. That's what we used to teach at Karate camps and such so I'd say that changed. The way that we fought. One of my problems, one of my issues around tournament fighting is if you just trained tournament fighters, I was just out of class the other day while watching my grandkids and they're doing tournament fighting, they're standing sideways and the instructor explained correctly that I can kick better from this and they can't kick you in the back so, if that kid never trains reality-based and they're sideways, their real "fighting" is, to me, not going to be wonderful so I think that that changed. That you have to have that change from tournament fighting to more reality-based fighting.

Jeremy Lesniak:

When we talk about that kind of anything goes style of sparring, do you remember where that came from? Where you got that from or how you guys came up with that on your own? I don't know that history on that. I just was one day was there from my memory.

Beth Bielat:

We used to do...you pair off and we'd say, alright, the attacker can throw one thing and you block and counter which I think is really important not to have people just be machines. They have to learn how to react. We started off slow and then we would get faster and faster so then it could be two things and then it could be as many things as you can throw at me until I counter or until I hit you, until I counter in some way. So, I think we did it one on one to start with and then we started putting the mats out and going 2 on 1 to 3 on 1 to suggest that that might be more likely in a street fight where it's not just one person and I think we just flew from there and had so much fun with it and learned so much and when



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we brought it to the camps, we, honestly, were watching black belts that had never done anything but [00:37:01] and taught basics. That was you throw a punch, I throw an outside form punch and that's all they knew so they were really brought to task and we loved it and other people enjoy doing it with us so, and then, what happens is that when you get a bunch of skilled black belts out on the floor doing this? Suddenly, it becomes really fast and really fun and it's reality as I can imagine and if they're skilled, people will get hurt. You can emulate going for the eyes and all that so you hit and you touch but there's a lot of control there and so, that's where that started. I imagine other schools do it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm sure they do but I have to say that I've never been to one that knows anything about it and the schools that I shared it with, it's something that we've talked about on the show before. It's something we've talked about as a drill option. At some point, I have to do a video. In fact, at some point, you and I have to do a video so that way, I don't steal your thunder. I didn't come up with it but yeah, it was those mats and those mats, those were just hanging under the basketball hoops to keep people from running the wall, right? And we would take them down and we would use them and thank God, we had them.

Beth Bielat:

Yeah, yeah. No, it was a lot of fun, creation and talking about that, I think there's something to be said about that creation because we didn't have these instructors with us day after day and training, I think when you have to create and make and invent things that there's something to be said about that, that you're not part of the hoards. That you're not just following. That it becomes you.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, yeah, I would agree with that and that was something that you always encouraged us to do and a lot of martial arts schools, maybe even [00:39:23] martial arts schools, not only don't encourage it but discourage that individualization. You're going to do this this way, you're going to do this this way.

Beth Bielat:

I think that's important in the beginning. I think when we're doing basics, I think that the instructor knows better and we talked a little bit about people branching off after so many years and people like to take a lot of things, that is really important to have a strong base. Following too many birds with one stone in the beginning can be very confusing. Stand like this, no, no, no, you stand like this. No, no, no, my school, you stand like this. No, no, no...so I think it's important that we get that base and then fly from there so, yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

This question is...I'm going to ask them in two ways because the first way is going to be really easy so I often ask people who has been the most influential person on who you are as a martial artist and I'm



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fairly certain who the answer is so I'll ask you that question and if you give me the answer I think you're going to after you answer it, I'll ask it a different way.

Beth Bielat:

I'm going to answer that two different ways too. Of course, John has been the most influential and here's why: what I just talked about, he helped me to realize that I didn't have to look for martial arts and an instructor outside of myself. I don't remember the martial arts movie where at the end he's looking for the master and he looks in the mirror and oh, I can be my own teacher, and we've talked about self-educated martial artist and I did that through going to camps and reading and it's before the internet and YouTube and that kind of thing so I was a seeker but I didn't have the confidence in myself to know that, hey! I had pretty good kata and I didn't have anybody since 18 years old teaching me kata. I fought pretty well but didn't have anybody teaching me how to fight necessarily, although, John did help a lot with my fighting. The second answer to that question is all the students. We were blessed to have wonderful people come into our dojo that were brown belts and black belts and going to camps and hooking up and going to other people's dojo. That was really, really influential too. I can learn from a seminar. I think you can, too. I can take that stuff home. I don't have to have somebody correct me all the time. They're showing me something and I can practice it and one of the days that I practice is by doing it. If somebody shows me a reverse punch, I will go and I will do that reverse punch on the bag until it becomes mine and so, we did some seminars also but we had, I can think of 5 or 6 different black belts that came from different schools that came and joined us and they were really influential as well.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That was always something very special about what we had was always the acceptance because, as listeners know, as you would imagine, part of my job is travelling around and visiting schools and, at this point now, I'm not getting invitations from people who aren't open to me coming in but there've been plenty of places that I've trained in that had no desire to know about anything that I knew. They wanted me to stand at the back and they wanted me to fall in and I was just another number. I always thought that was weird and I still think that was weird because we're all better together.

Beth Bielat:

We are and I just remember when someone would come visit, we'd be like hey, want to teach for a little while? What do you do? Show us! We had that thirst and hunger to want to see what other people did and I think it's important that we make people visit feel a little special. We're all martial artists. We have so much in common. We have so much to learn from each other.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Let's kind of flip that question around. We've talked about who you have, turn that into who would you want to, if you could, train with anybody? Who would that be?



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Beth Bielat:

I have one fantasy person. Probably Yoda.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Why Yoda?

Beth Bielat:

I love the spiritual part of martial arts and understanding chi and prana and understanding the principles of what is life and so that's really been the big, big part of my journey has been my spirituality involved in the martial arts and beyond so that would be my pretend person. I think, in reality, I think some of the old monks had a big component of that too. I always thought that kung fu is so beautiful. I love the flow of that so I think that that would be an awesome group. There being a problem being a woman so that's also, probably, a fantasy and one of the instructors that was very influential, for both John and I, when we were growing up, there was a school called BKG in New Jersey and Master Henry was the head instructor and he put out some of the most amazing technicians that I can ever remember. Now, I was young and maybe influenced differently but their katas were amazing. Their fighting, again, flow, power, stances and that a few years ago, John and I were both inducted in one of the martial arts hall of fames and Master Henry sat with us and so he's this genteel, amazing, quiet monk-like man and he remembered us. I think he knew me, probably, as a green belt back in the early '70s. The way he remembered me, which was interesting was, I was at the tournament and Mr. Ralph Chirico is a big tournament producer back then and I broke his daughter's nose so he remembered. I told him who I was and he said, oh, yeah, yeah, you're the one who broke Ralph Chirico's daughter's nose and I thought oh, great but I think he put out amazing black belts. He had something magical in his dojo and it had to be him because he was the base and, another note to this is, it'd be kind of neat just to have a teacher for a while. I never had anybody as an adult to learn something for a long time.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Do you think you'd be a good student?

Beth Bielat:

Oh yeah. Oh gosh yeah. I'd love to put on a white belt and suck every little thing I could get about technique and philosophy and spirituality. It would definitely have to be a special person to be that instructor. I would need somebody that was very, in my eyes, very, very good. Into the spiritual part, into the body mechanics and so on.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I can see that. I can see you doing that. Now, you've brought up competition a couple times and I've always kind of seen your opinions on competition almost be a little conflicted and even if we kind of dig



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in into what you've said about competition just in the last 45 minutes, it's almost been a little bit contradictory. Tell us more about that. How do you see competition? I'll just leave it at that.

Beth Bielat:

I think that there's the good and the bad. I think that, like for you, it brought something out of you that was so special and so, that's the good part. I hear on your podcast, I hear the camaraderie and how hard people train and they get to travel all over the world so there's some wonderful things that come out of tournaments. On the other hand, I just get a little concerned and worried about the quality of some of the made up katas and the bunkai, whether there's really any application to the movements, and I worry about the fighting styles that might have a negative impact on a real life situation. That's really the only negative and I think there's a whole lot more positive than negative and, as far as my own experience, when we grew up as kids, we pretty much had to go to tournaments.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Why?

Beth Bielat:

It was almost part of when you're involved in the USKA. I wouldn't say that it was a mandatory thing but it had a lot to do with you getting promoted. It had a lot to do with you and it made me very nervous as a kid and my very first tournament that I can remember was there was no gear, boys and girls in the same ring and I bowed in and the kid put his hands down and wouldn't fight me because I was a girl. His dad told him he could never hit a girl and I get that now but it just rang something in me and I pummeled the guy. We were allowed to hit hard.

Jeremy Lesniak:

How old were you?

Beth Bielat:

Maybe 10, 9 or 10 and he put his hands down and I said, if you're not going to hit me, you sure you want to do this? And he's like I'm not doing it. BOOM! I think it was 3 points at that time. I didn't hit him. we weren't allowed to hit on the head. I remembered that experience and that was my first experience on the tournament and then, we did some and I won. I won a lot! I don't remember losing but it made me very nervous so I kind of stopped and, as an adult, I don't know if you remember, I made myself go back and compete and I just did it for a little while because it still made me nervous and I'll do a kata and a fight in front of 10,000 people. Call it a tournament where you're being points or scored and something happens to my gut and I get nervous and excited but we were at the Dow here in Augusta, Maine. Big tournament at that time and I tied with a Canadian champion who've been a world champion for kata for a long time so we tied and we do a second kata, we tied again but she did the same kata which we



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never allowed in our domain. We always had to do a different kata and then we tied again so, finally, on the 4th try, she did the same kata each time, she did this little tiny slip, like a foot slipped and I'm usually a kind person and I don't remember if I said it out loud or whether I said it to myself and I was like YES! I finally beat her and won the tournament so I did make myself go back and I love to perform kata and I love to do sparring. I don't like the nervousness of the actual tournament, personally.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Did that, maybe we call it a fear of judgement? Did that manifest in other way like school and academics?

Beth Bielat:

Yeah. No, I mean, I love to perform.

Jeremy Lesniak:

But if there was a test like if there's going to be a score at the end or something like that?

Beth Bielat:

I don't think so. Maybe it was because Karate was so important to me and then, a little piece of the puzzle was being judged by people who maybe don't understand the kata and, at that time, there was a lot of non-traditional katas that came through and I felt like I didn't do a really good job of staying traditional and making that as good as I could so yeah, I think it was a judgment thing really.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Movies. I remember, I have these vague memories of us getting together and me getting kicked out because we were going to watch something too violent or whatever. You mentioned when we started talking that martial arts wasn't on your radar and you hadn't watched a number of movies and that that element of that culture wasn't part of your inspiration for getting in but at some point, it seemed like you appreciated that at some level. What was it about martial arts movies when you would watch them, you thought that well, we need to get together and watch it? Budo, was that one with the guy that gets his head cut off? I've still never seen that because I was told no, this is so violent and you're not going to like it so, frankly, I'm not going to go there.

Beth Bielat:

Yeah, when you were a kid, we had Budo The Soul of Japan, it was a documentary of Japanese martial arts and it was very good. So yeah, at the end, the guy gets his head cut off and we didn't think it was appropriate for 4 year olds and 8 year olds and so, we did do some home videos of getting together and watching movies and going up having kids' classes, when a new movie came out, it was awesome for business. When Karate Kid came out, when Ninja Turtles came out. That's another memory. I remember



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we lived in this little town of Casco, Maine and we had an annual parade and one year, we had all the kids dress up as Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. We bought, I remember, Jeremy green tights and green almost like a dance shirt and we made papier-mâché turtle shells and we made them. Us and the mothers all made them. We made the strips for the eyes and they all got up and they were on a flat bed. We pulled them in the parade and every so many yards, they would get off and we'd all do pinion sodar first kata and they would do the kata on the pavement and they would jump back up on the trailer and we'd go a little bit further so I do remember that memory as well.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I think I've talked a little bit about that. The memory of going down to the lake and watching the green paint off which, I'm sure, now, would be a huge no-no and getting recognized as a kid. I think I was probably 10. Probably 10 back when we did that.

Beth Bielat:

One of the things about Karate Kid that just recently happened that was very heartwarming to me was, I have 5 grand children now and the 3 oldest were doing martial arts, and my granddaughter, Adela, was here at the house and we threw the TV on and she was 7 and I got to watch Karate Kid with her and I was just a little tearful and at the end, jumping up when he won the tournament. We were running around screaming, Woohoo! He won the tournament! Her being a little scared during the Halloween scene and me explaining exactly who that was and what happened, so having my grandchildren watching movies with me has been a life changer.

Jeremy Lesniak:

There's something about that movie that still holds up.

Beth Bielat:

Oh God, yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And it shouldn't. It really shouldn't. The acting's terrible, the dialogue's not really good. There's nothing that you can really point that I think is particularly remarkable other than it so perfectly captures so much of the human experience and especially the experience, I think, of being a martial artist and what it feels to be a martial artist when you're not in martial arts and the rest of world going... kind of pushing on, yeah.

Beth Bielat:

One of the movies, I think, that does have a lot of good acting and a good storyline that was one of my favorites was The Last Samurai. I'm not a big Tom Cruise fan and I thought he did a really good job. I love



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that story of the guy coming in not knowing anything, being beaten up a little bit and surviving and coming out of it on top. Good story.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, that's kind of the universal martial arts experience. If you haven't been beaten up a little bit, did you really train?

Beth Bielat:

Amen.

Jeremy Lesniak:

As we can refer back to what 3 hours ago, 2 hours ago.

Beth Bielat:

I accidentally hit Jeremy a lot harder than I should've with my elbow to the back of his head.

Jeremy Lesniak:

There's a flat spot now. Aw, I'm just kidding. But that's...I think not every school looks at this, I think, in this way but the idea that part of training is taking shots and I remember at one point, you saying I don't want you guys going out there and not knowing what it's like to get hit and I don't feel like we have to sit here and beat on you because you're going to miss once in a while. You're going to take a shot, people you're training with, people that you care about...

Beth Bielat:

Yes, very, very true. I think, at the point when you were training with us, we fought hard and we hit hard but not to the point where we were hurting each other to not be able to get to work the next day or go to school the next day but I do think it's important as you've talked about in the podcast. When fear comes in and when the unexpected comes in and you don't know what you're going to do, first time you get hit hard and it hurts. Are you going to freeze or are you going to take it and be able to continue? That's a little bit about, I've heard you talk a little bit about your black belt test. Our black belt test, it's different for each person in that we try to get them to the point where they've gotten to I don't know if I can do anymore. I don't know. I'm not going to say we're trying to break someone but we're trying to get them to the point where they move to the next level, able to survive it and something happens where they realize that I can do. I'm not sure I can lift my arms up one more time to do one more fight but with encouragement you did and you'll never forget that and we'll never forget that and I really believe that kind of black belt test gives someone that yeah, I can do anything attitude. I can do it. One more time, lifting my arms up one more time, especially with encouragement. That was a piece of the puzzle.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

So, let's talk about the future. I don't imagine that your why for training has changed much. I mean, how that's manifested, how you've expressed the why has changed but I don't think we've talked and you've mentioned anything that oh, I haven't trained for the last 6 months of anything like that so, as you look into the next however many years you want to look, how does that why get expressed?

Beth Bielat:

At this time in my life, our lives with my husband, John, we have decided to take our lives in a direction where we do have other interests besides Karate. At one point in our lives, it was huge, it was 5 meets a week. We love the outdoors. We love to hike and bike and fish and live off the land. We live in a log cabin that we have created, we've built from the logs. We hand hewed 600 logs and we built this and we're still building it so the reason this plays into what I'm going to say is it's all about who we are and so, what brings in our future is a balance between all these things that we love and Karate is still going to be a big part of that so, when I peeled 600 logs, I was doing Karate every moment of that. I have to laugh when I see CrossFit's great, they're flipping the logs, well, we do that for real. I'm building rock walls and I've got 300 pounds of rocks in my wheelbarrow and that's a really big part of our training and I love being in this wild place. We live off the grid et cetera and we also live very far from our children and our students who we train with so the future brings the continued training on our own. I work out every day. We work out every morning. I'm also a personal trainer. I do yoga, I do lots of different things. That's still my livelihood. My livelihood is still teaching and so it's that balance between living far away with nature and training ourselves but we're really dedicated to continue to work with the students that we have had in the past and in the future, our grandchildren. another little piece of the puzzle is Life Breath. Life Breath is something that I created 30 years ago. A very, very powerful modality, a transformation modality that works on the physical, emotional, mental and spiritual level and so, I still go out and teach Life Breath a lot. I'm still out doing that on a weekly basis too. It's life-changing. We used to go to a lot of dojos and teach Life Breath. It's a balance of all those things.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Balance. If people want to find you online, I know social media is not your favorite thing but you're involved social media, websites, what might people want to check out?

Beth Bielat:

For martial artists, I think they'd be very interested in Life Breath so the website for Life Breath is thelifebreath.com and it does some explanation and we travel and teach both privately and in group. Another endeavor that keeps me busy too is I have a retreat each year or sometimes more than one but really focused on one. It's called Mainly Women. It's a health and wellness retreat. We do fitness and spirituality and have a lot of fun and so it's a women's retreat that we do in September every year so that's mainlywomen.com and my email is lifebreathbeth@hotmail.com.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

Great and so, anybody that might be new to the show, we put these show notes at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. I don't do email links because that just makes it easier for the spammers to find you and crawl around but, of course, if you really want to email, you can take back, you can find the address there. So, cool, thank you.

Beth Bielat:

Thank you.

Jeremy Lesniak:

You know how we wrap up. It's the parting words so what advice, what wisdom would you give to the people listening?

Beth Bielat:

I think a few things. I think for the women listening, I think it would be wonderful to understand that they may not be as strong as men, physically, but they can be as strong as they can be so I think it's important for everyone, not just women too, to cross train, to be strong, to be smart and fast and train that way so I think that's really important. I think that's what kept my head in the game. Being able to feel comfortable working with men. I also think that I think, in this time of my life, I think we go through stages where we're the athlete and the seeker and, even the person who wants to give back to the martial arts, I think that's where the stage that I'm at. The giving back and the meaning. I'm in this place where I'm really working a lot on my spirituality and the meaning of life and, that being said, I have a quote that I love that I'd love to share with everybody. I'm a big fan of creating your destiny and what we focus on, we often create in life and Thoreau actually had a beautiful saying about that. If you advance confidently in the direction of your own dreams, and endeavor to live the life that you have imagined, you will meet with a success unexpected in common hours. I believe that's about seeing the cup half full, focusing on the good, being a great person and your life can become pretty wonderful and magical. We've all been so blessed.

Jeremy Lesniak:

This was important for me and the stories were powerful, not just because I've heard some of them before and honestly, quite a few of the details that I heard when I recorded her, new for me but I hope that this story, this conversation is impactful for you because I know, from personal experience, that this woman, as with so many other martial arts instructors, has been impactful on many people. We all have the opportunity to change lives and here on this show, we've talked to people who have done that but in speaking with Shihan Beth, I was able to reflect and see how much of who I am, as a person and as a martial artist, lay with her and her instruction, her teaching, her guidance. For those of you out there who are martial arts instructors, I'd like you to remember: you don't always know the impact that you



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have on others. You don't always know how profound, how deep it can be but I hope that you can trust that if you're doing what you love in the best way you can, it will change lives and I'm proof of that. Thank you so much for coming on this show, talking with me and for the incredibly long list of things that you've done for me over the years. If you want to find the show notes with photos and so much more, you can do that at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. If you use the code PODCAST15 at whistlekick.com, you're going to get 15% off everything that we do and if you want to find us on social media, see all the great memes and motivational quotes and other cool stuff that we're doing, @whistlekick, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram. My email address: jeremy@whistlekick.com, nice and easy and I'd love to hear from you, love to hear your feedback, whether that's public or private. Until next time, train hard, smile and have a great day!