



Episode 464 – Sensei Jenny Siu | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com



Jeremy Lesniak:

Hello, everyone! Welcome, this is whistlekick martial arts radio episode 464. Today, I'm joined by Sensei Jenni Siu. I'm Jeremy Lesniak, I'm your host on this show. I'm the founder here at whistlekick and I'm a guy who thinks the world of martial arts and that's why we bring all of our martial arts content to the world and if you want to see everything we've got going on, go to whistlekickmartialartsradio.com for every single episode of this show but wait, there's more! Go to whistlekick.com and you can see all the other stuff we're doing because whistlekick is a lot more than this show. We've got a store over there. If you make a purchase, use the code `PODCAST15`. That will save you 15% and it helps us know that this show leads to sales which means we can justify putting the money in. We're bringing you this show twice a week. On Mondays, we bring you an interview like today. On Thursday s, we bring you some kind of a topic show. Sometimes, it's just me. Sometimes, I bring a guest on and the entire goal of the show is to connect, educate, inspire martial artists from around the world and if you want to help contribute to that mission, there are a lot of ways you can help. Whether it's making a purchase or sharing an episode or if you join our Patreon, patreon.com/whistlekick and you can get those links from our websites to get there, we have more content, more stuff for you that's only for people who contribute. Let's talk about the guest. Typically, when someone comes on this show, I know nothing more than their name. Once in a while, we have a guest who I know of maybe because of things that they've done in the martial arts world or maybe it's a friend of mine. Well, today's guest sits on a few different spaces. I've known who Sensei Siu is because of her relationship to her husband and his



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relationship to whistlekick but she and I have never talked before. At least before this episode so it was a lot of fun to finally have a conversation with this person that I knew of but did not know and I think it was a really good conversation. We talked about faith and fate and of course, we talked about her husband, we talked about whistlekick, we talked about a lot of things and I had a great time with it. I hope you do as well so let's welcome her to the show. How are you?

Jenni Siu:

Doing well, how are you doing?

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm great, thank you.

Jenni Siu:

It's great to finally meet you.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, yeah! I was just thinking that. Huh, I don't think we've ever spoken.

Jenni Siu:

Yeah, weird! It's awesome.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It is awesome! I appreciate your time.

Jenni Siu:

I was just going to tell you. I'm home alone with my 3 kids. They should sleep through this whole thing but just a heads up, I told them they can all watch a movie and eat cookies until I'm done. If they come in here, I'll shoo them back out. They're awesome but yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

If we get the chance to edit that, we'll do.

Jenni Siu:

That will be the only chance of an interruption but they're pretty amazing, though, so, but I'm a little biased.

Jeremy Lesniak:

As you should be. If you're not then I think that might say something.



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Jenni Siu:

Indeed. So, how are you doing?

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm great. I'm great. Busy as hell but great.

Jenni Siu:

Hey, that's a good thing.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It sure is.

Jenni Siu:

We are as well. Seems like there's, uh...we were just talking about we have to schedule downtime, man.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, yeah. I've been getting better. I've been aiming for Fridays like I'm trying to knock off early on Fridays which has been huge because what it means is I get stuff done faster. I am the worst person in the world at tasks expanding to the time available so there are days and I look at my schedule and I'm like this is like a half days' worth of work. 11 hours later, you could have been a lot more efficient, Jeremy.

Jenni Siu:

I know. That's life. That's absolutely life.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It is. It really is and that's ok. Ok, it gets better. You know how this goes.

Jenni Siu:

I think so.

Jeremy Lesniak:

You listen to this and you know what I want to do? I just want to roll into it if you're ok with that.

Jenni Siu:

Sounds good.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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We're just chatting and I think a lot of listeners appreciate when I do these episodes.

Jenni Siu:

Awesome. I'm quite honored after listening to some of my episodes, I definitely don't think that I stand up there with some of the others.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Well, I don't either.

Jenni Siu:

Yeah, I know and as I say that, I think to myself but you know what? I'm passionate about this and I'm doing it and I'm loving it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And isn't that the important part, though?

Jenni Siu:

It is.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Because what I love about martial arts is we all have that different relationship with it. It's more alike than it's different and we focus on the differences and that can be good because it allows us to find where we are and it drives me nuts when people, they look at what someone else does in the martial arts. It's literally changing their lives or, in some cases, has saved their life and they criticize this and say what you're doing isn't martial arts. It makes me want to strangle them.

Jenni Siu:

Same here.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Let's do that first question thing that we got to do about you and how you got started.

Jenni Siu:

Ok, sounds good. I got started, to be absolutely honest, being a little kid and I was the only girl in our entire neighborhood and what that meant was all of the guys that I've played with I'm talking 5, 6, 7 years old. They were awesome kids. They were safe and so, that was a huge blessing but it was a big group of guys that just loved to wrestle and play war and watch Chuck Norris and MacGyver and I was my mom's little princess who she kind of planned was going to do ballet and do all that stuff and I ran



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around with the guys and had a blast and all of us always talked about martial arts. To be fair, we always talked about Karate because we didn't know anything else, any other words, I should say, but none of us ever had formal training or things like that. That was, at that time, our perception was that was for the rich kids and we couldn't afford to go take classes so we just play and pretend but it was always a dream. Our family didn't have a lot of money so, fast forward to when I was 12, so I've had this dream my whole life but it was really never more than that. I knew it was just too expensive to become a reality for us but when I was 12, Christmas day, my aunt who was practically a best friend more than an aunt, she had seen a sign for an introductory Karate class for her health club that she attended and worked out at and she thought that it be a really cool Christmas present and she asked my parents and we ended up attending that together, she and I, and that was my very first introduction to martial arts. It was a 10-week course in Shitō-ryū. I had no clue what different styles of martial arts were at all. I just knew I finally got to do Karate and man, I was eating it up. I was absolutely loving it so that's really how I got introduced and started. She, pretty amazing, because not only did that fulfill a huge dream for me, I actually got this kind, because she did something kind for me and she ended up meeting her future husband in that class and so, after a few weeks, they would drop me off for Karate and they'd go out on dates and they were married about 6 months later which was really fantastic. He's an amazing guy but that was my introduction to it and at the end of that 12-week course, I was accepted to join their club there that met there but it was really expensive, again, kind of same problem and also, my family is Christian. My parents were pretty conservative Christians and one of the things that they're not comfortable with were some of the eastern practices. Meditation and such, they're not understanding those, not wanting to be a part of those, especially their 12-year old kid, and so I was pretty discouraged that I finally got to do Karate and I didn't get to continue but I do believe that that was, again, that was totally God's plan and he got something better and you can't see that when you're 12 and disappointed but fast forward a few months, finished that course up somewhere around May and in August, I found another martial arts school that was significantly cheaper and called them, talked to them and ended up starting to attend there. That was in August when I was 12, almost 13, and I ended up joining that school and I continued there until they closed when I was 17 and it was amazing. I learned so much. There was an interesting dynamic going on when I first got there that I had no idea about. What had happened was my sensei, the owner of the school, his daughter had died about 2 weeks before I started attending there and I had no idea and obviously, he just couldn't bring himself to come to the dojo and teach classes for months and so, his friends all around in the martial arts community were amazing guys and they jumped in to keep his school alive and so, I started right at this point and I really didn't understand what in the world was going on but it was really fascinating because just about every different class was taught by a different sensei and they all taught a little differently and they all had a little different uniform on, they had a different program and so, I was confused. I didn't exactly get, I didn't exactly move up in the syllabus. So, anyways, I had this really, really interesting situation that I had walked into and I had no idea and long term, it was awesome because I got perspectives from different martial arts instructors all over, all at once. One guy was really focused on sparring, another guy was really focused on your stances and kata, et cetera, et cetera and I was just starting out and I was eating it all up but I



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never met the owner of the school until I was actually already a blue belt in his system. I think that's a unique start to your martial arts training and I think it was one that definitely gave me an interesting perspective and one of the amazing things about that school was a guy that I have to say, I got to talk about him, his name was Harry and he was 16. He was a green belt which was just below the black belt ranks, the red, brown and black ranks in that style and he's only 16 but he was there every single day. If no black belt showed up, he did classes. He did his very best. He trained like crazy so that he could keep that school going, he could keep it running. He was definitely the backbone of that school during that time period and really, all throughout my time there. He was only a few years older than me and he wasn't a black belt but when people ask me who was your sensei, that's who I consider my sensei because he invested so much. He went and he would go on his off time and he would go to other schools and he'd say hey, I haven't learned about this. Can I put on a white belt? Can you just throw me around and show me some stuff? Can I just sit and watch? I just want to learn. I don't have a lot of money but if you want me to pay you, I'll try and people were, it was fascinating because he would find some people who were very receptive and say come on in, we'll take you under our wing, we'll teach you what we know, you teach us what you know and it would be great and you'd have other people say are you kidding me? Go back to your own school. Do your own thing and so, he would come back and he would kind of debrief those experiences and it definitely rounded out my training and so I attribute a lot of what I learned, definitely, to him. So, that was my start. My sensei did come back. He was an amazing guy. He's an amazing martial artist. Obviously, he had a rough year that year so I did not get very close to him because I was very close to the same age as his daughter and I think that was an element where he just distanced himself from a lot of us who had started at that period in time but he came around as he was able and he was a fantastic instructor so I was very blessed to be able to grow up there.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's quite the beginning.

Jenni Siu:

It is, it is. I'm very, very thankful.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah and what's interesting in that story is I see so many places where it could have gone sideways.

Jenni Siu:

Oh, absolutely! So do I as I see it in retrospect.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah and what's blowing my mind, I think if we tried to put Vegas odds on it, the likelihood that you would've persisted through and speak to me now are just so miniscule. Most people who start martial



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arts don't continue. We kick around these number, 1 in 100 or whatever it is, ever earn a black belt. We know it's a small percentage but that's encompassing everyone who has, including supportive parents and instructors who don't lose their children and all of these things and I'm just, it's almost like one after another, it's like bam, bam, bam, bam! How your martial arts upbringing took all these hits and you just kept going through it. It's almost, you're clearly a person of faith, it's almost like it was fate. It had to happen and I know a little bit of your story because, I'll probably mention something on this in the intro because of our connection and the conversations I've had with your husband, but it seems like this was part of your path from day 1.

Jenni Siu:

Absolutely and I believe that. Of course, I believe that and of course, as my story continues, I personally can see exactly why all these have happened. I couldn't see it then and that was ok for then. One of the other aspects that just blows my mind is we didn't have extra money for extra things but I had truly incredible supportive parents who loved us so well and I have a younger sister and they were so supportive that when I came to them and I said hey, I found this school that costs literally half of what everyone else is charging, I know because I called them all. As a 12 year old, I put out the yellow pages and called everybody but I said this school is charging, literally half of what the school was charging. It's not that far away and this is something I'd really like to do. Is there a way we can make this work? My mom's response was well, I can teach some piano lessons and we can use that money to pay for Karate. I just found that incredible. Her willingness to just instantly, just sacrifice, just say you know what? I can give up time. I can make that happen for you and then, I know now as a teacher that there are not as many supportive parents out there as there should be and that's one of my passions is that kids get the support that they need because I look back and I think to myself, when I was going through my first forms as a white and yellow belt and stumbling around in our backyard or our living room, my parents didn't know martial arts. They didn't know anything about it but constantly, they were hey, that looks good! Oh, I think I can tell. It was better than it's been last week. Have you been working on that? I don't know what I'm talking about but man, you're looking sharper and sharper. Just, little things like that, I remember them 30 years later and it was pretty incredible so I was very, very blessed that they said hey, this is something that you're passionate about. We're going to make sure, even if you have to compromise and hang out at the library for a few hours to make it to class, we'll make sure to drive you out there 4 days a week and it was pretty amazing.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Now, you brought up earlier the challenge that they had with some of the eastern traditions that most of us in the martial arts are very familiar with and don't view in a religious aspect but outside of martial arts, they're at least religion-adjacent, if not religious practices. How did you work through that? That's a subject that I'm seeing come up more and more in martial arts groups that I'm part of. What was that conversation like?



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Jenni Siu:

That was a fascinating conversation. It's one that continued for years, obviously. Especially the longer I was in martial arts, the more exposed I was to more of those things and the more I studied, the more I learned. At the core, at the very beginning, this school that I began to attend, claimed to teach from a Christian point of view. It was another one of the things that was encouraging to our family. In fairness, it was in the name and that was about it. There weren't any Christian values being taught in the sense that they didn't really bring up the bible, they didn't really talk about God. It was just void of those things that were concerning to Christians, if that makes sense, and so, they just kind of took out what they didn't need and kept what they wanted and didn't really explain anything or talk about it and I don't think that was wrong of them but personally, I wanted to go there and asked those questions and I'm glad you asked that question. I have recently read of people who they wanted to do martial arts and they are not comfortable with bowing. We have had families come to us and say, hey, we're interested in your program but why do you guys bow? Why do you guys show reverence to each other like that? Isn't bowing a religious practice? Isn't that supposed to be for God or worship? And so, really looking into and studying the origins of that and the meaning behind them and I know many out there understand a lot more than I do but I have studied and a lot of people will say the meditation thing. A lot of people will sit in seiza and a lot of people spend a lot of time meditating and clearing their mind and as a Christian, you have to ask the question is that right? is it wrong? Is it ok? Is it neutral? Is it a part of another religion? It can be, it can be all of those things. Some people say well, I just sit there and pray. I talk to God. For me, personally, I don't meditate. I haven't seen the need or the value. I do pray a lot but that's something that I don't personally do. I haven't needed to and I don't have that as a part of my curriculum in my school right now but we do bow and we explain it. there's a lot of different ways to discuss and explain that practice. There are people who see it as an act of worship and in some religions, it is. Well, we say, where does the martial arts where we're studying come from and what did it mean to the people who started doing it? And that's really the question we like to ask about everything and I have kind of just wrestled with what am I comfortable with because as a Christian, I'm a Christian first but I'm also a martial artist but they aren't, in my experience, they're not at all mutually exclusive. I don't know if that answers your question in enough detail.

Jeremy Lesniak:

It does and I think long time listeners know that I'm a free market guy. I believe you should be able to take whatever you want, take your martial arts and expand it and open it and if you want to put a religious tone on it. I've talked to and we have a number of martial artists on this show who are devout to their faith, whatever that faith may be and some of them will create a really strong barrier between the faith and the martial art practice and some say that's not what I want to do. I want to blend them, in fact, and what I think is great about that is that it attracts other people who are interested in that and it would be one thing if there was only one place to study martial arts, if we had one school that somehow had a monopoly over martial arts practice then maybe we'd have to have a conversation about that but



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we don't have to because that isn't the case and if someone's faith enhances their martial arts practice and their martial arts practice enhances their faith, awesome. What's wrong with that? it may not be the particular type of training that someone wants to do, that's fine. You have other options but what I love about what you're talking about is that faith is important to you and your martial arts is woven through that and I think, whatever is important to us, finding a way to weave martial arts into that is important and I think it enhances our understanding.

Jenni Siu:

Absolutely. Yeah. Thanks for asking that. That's a great question.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Of course. It's a question that a lot of people shy away from because, just based on numbers, I'll guarantee that the first time that you mentioned that you're a Christian, somebody turned off the show. That's fine. That's their problem because we don't have to agree and follow the same practices to find value. One of the early criticisms of this show was that most of the people coming on were taekwondo practitioners. Because that's what I had around me at the time. Those were the people I was able to bring on but just because they were of the taekwondo background doesn't mean their stories were relevant or entertaining or inspiring to people who practice other things. I am not a Christian but you and I can still have this conversation and I can still find beauty in the way that you are talking about these two things that are very important to you and I hope that others out there can get that because, unfortunately, we live in a time right now where everything is being thrown into these dichotomies and you're this or you're that and if you're not on the same side of these fences or walls then you can't agree, you can't talk, you can't be friends and if this were a different kind of show where I didn't censor foul language, I would go on about a 90-second tirade stringing expletives about how I feel on that but it isn't so I won't.

Jenni Siu:

I appreciate that and personally, we have chosen to run our martial arts school from a Christian perspective but we're very clear, I don't care if you're Christian or not. You can join us. You just know that we are and that's going to come up and I'm totally fine if a new student doesn't come from a Christian home, I don't care. They're here to do Karate. We're going to end up talking about God and if that bothers them, I really, really hope that brings up a good open discussion and that that's never something that separates us but if it is, it's a loss. It's definitely a loss because we should be able to have those open conversations and in regards to martial arts, too, you just mentioned most of the people you started out speaking with in the early times were mostly taekwondo practitioners because that's who you knew, that's how I felt as a kid and I only knew Karate. I only knew that martial arts was Karate and I would go to tournaments and I would look at other people doing all these soft forms whether it was Kung Fu or Wing Chun or tai chi or whatever it was and I would literally look at them and be like wow,



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they're weird. We never do anything like that and the word weird popped up and I heard a very, very wise friend tell me one time, never think some thing's weird. It's different. Find out why it's different and find out why you had that response and then you're going to realize that you just learned something that you needed to learn and we carry that now into our school and at our, kind of, our mid-ranks, we start having our student spread out and learn about other martial arts because I don't want them to only say well, I learned Karate but I don't know about any of these other stuff. You can learn something from anyone. I mean, in the martial arts context, I can send my kids over to a friend who runs a Kung Fu school and say they don't do things at all the way we do them but he's an incredible martial artist. If I sent you over there for a 2-hour class, you'd come back and you just come back and go oh my goodness, I just learned so much or taekwondo or fill in the blank and so, that's definitely something that, in regards to martial arts, we don't want our students to have the experience that I had where you go to a tournament and you just go what in the world are all these people doing but to be able to have a discerning mind and be able to look around and go oh, hey, I watched that on YouTube. That's really cool, I'm going to go and talk to them about that. I always say I hope this is your first black belt. I don't hope it's your only one, I hope it's your first one and I want you to come back and teach me what you learn in your next one because I'm getting old and my body's broken and learn a bunch more, get a bunch more black belts but that doesn't mean I ever stop learning.

Jeremy Lesniak:

That's a great attitude for it. One more piece on what we're talking about because I suspect there's a, not head-scratching, but I can always sense when people are saying hey Jeremy, poke on that a little bit. I'm just curious when you talk about this integration of faith and talking about God in your classes, what does that look like and how have, I think this is the more important part, how have you considered and possibly changed how you've done that over the years?

Jenni Siu:

It's a great question. For foundation, what I had was we open our class in prayer and then name of our school has the word Christian in it and that's it. There is no more discussion about God. That's what I grew up, the school I grew up in. That was the extent of Christian. When Gabe and I started talking about starting a school and starting things out, I talked to him and I said hey, what was missing way back then? Was character training. We were told hey, don't make fun of other people hey, be a good sport, have good sportsmanship, have a good attitude whether you win or lose, all those things. We weren't told why. We weren't given any reasons and over the years, as I've worked with kids a lot, here or overseas, I love kids and as I work with them, kids as why especially when they don't want to do what you're expecting them to do and I'm sure you've experienced that as an instructor. Yeah, but why do we do it that way? Why do I have to? I wanted to be able, in a respectful situation, in a respectful context to answer them and of course, my foundation, my reason for why in regards to those character traits is that the bible is the core of what I believe and so, the bible says you treat people with respect, you love people. treat them with kindness, with integrity, you have integrity. What does integrity mean? It means



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doing the right thing even when no one is watching and so, we decided, ok, so we're going to have these core character traits that we talked about in class and that we expect from our students, in regards to decorum in the dojo and at tournaments and in general, and we want to give them the why and that goes as deep as the student wants to go. With every rank test, with every rank requirement, we have scripture memory and we ask them to memorize couple of verses that has something specifically to do with what we're teaching. We've had a lot of discussion about what verses to choose and we wanted them to be very, very applicable. One of the verses that we chose was from Proverbs and we have our yellow belts learn it. It just says doing wrong is like a joke to a fool but wisdom is pleasure to a man of understanding. That's a principle that I can use every single time that those kids are messing around and not listening and causing other kids not to listen or thinking it's funny to hurt somebody say dude, come over here, what did we learn? Doing wrong is like a joke to who? To a fool. Do you want to be a fool? I don't want you to be a fool. I want you to be wise. Wisdom is pleasure to a man of understanding. That's what I want you to grow up to be and so, those are the things that we have chosen to really use as the core of how we do what we do and the students respond really well because that gives them, even if they don't care about the bible, even if they're not Christians, still that's a principle that gives them and it's exciting especially with the little ones to see them go oh yeah, I chose to do the right thing because I memorized this and I remembered it and I did it and then to recognize that and to encourage that, it's very profitable so that's what we do. We obviously spend a lot of time working on just martial arts skills but we try to weave in there character training as well because, from my point of view, you can't be a good or even a great martial artist. You can't be a great martial artist and have a rotten attitude or bad character in the sense that I've seen some people with some great skills could care less about how other people feel, could care less about who they leave in their wake as they move along in life and that's not a great martial artist.

Jeremy Lesniak:

You probably know I fully agree to that statement. That's great. It's good stuff. I love hearing just the different ways people teach and if someone's showing up and they're showing up again, then there's clearly value in what you're teaching and the way you're teaching it and yeah, I dig it. I really do.

Jenni Siu:

Awesome.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Let's move on from there so, story time and you know I love everybody's stories. We kind of heard your origin story there and I can't imagine that in your time teaching, especially children and training and the fact that you married someone who trains, I can't imagine there isn't a pile of stories that we could go through.

Jenni Siu:



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Indeed. Indeed, there is.

Jeremy Lesniak:

But if I ask you for your favorite one to share, what would that be?

Jenni Siu:

Oh man. I think my favorite one will be the time I spent, and this is specific, it won't sound like it but just tying together what I said earlier as I was sharing my origin story that there was a purpose and there was a reason behind all this that I didn't see. I just knew I was having fun. I knew that when I went to tournaments, a lot of the times I won and when I lost, I learned a lot but fast forward, fast forward to being 17. I'm 17 years old, I'm a brown belt. I'm as high as I can go without testing for a black belt and I didn't get my black belt then and our dojo closed. We lost the lease. My sensei moved away, he moved out of state and everything just kind of fell apart and there I was, actively training for my black belt test with no panel of black belts to test me and that was hard and the reason I bring that up is because, leading into the story I want to tell, that was important because, of course, when you start Karate especially as a kid, you start any martial art, what's your goal? What's your first goal? To get your black belt, right? That was my goal. So, as I moved on in life, God took me to Russia. I went to a lot of places in between 17 and 24 but when I was in 24, I ended up in Russia. Living in Russia, in the last place on earth I thought I would end up but there I was small village, living and working full time in an orphanage and I just knew I wanted to love on kids. I just got on a short term trip, I had no idea how to speak the language, I hated the food, I hated the culture, I hated everything about it except for the fact that those kids stole my heart and I just wanted, with everything in me to go back and just love on them and I knew I didn't have the language skills, I knew I didn't have a lot of the skills that I would need to successfully live there but I just couldn't shake it. This is what I was created to do. I just didn't know it until this moment. It was a beautiful thing. My best friend and I, she was my roommate in college, we ended up being able to go back there and we got a visa for a year, which was remarkable, almost impossible but there's a whole other story. We got a visa for a year, found ourselves living in this dorm building of this orphanage and there were a 120, between 120, 130 kids living in this building. If you've ever seen a movie with orphanages in it, this was surreal. There's a lot of noise, there's a lot of people and a lot of chaos and being there, I found out so much about why I learned martial arts. I almost died several times and my martial arts training is truly the thing that the reason I'm here today and I can say that with 100% certainty because as I look back on several experiences, I know that had I not known hey, I can flip this guy and knock the wind out of him and take off the other direction, had I not learned being aware of surroundings, just scope things out, have that martial artist mindset, I absolutely know that I won't be here today. That's a sobering thought. One I'm just eternally grateful for and as I was in the orphanage, I had experiences that I think a lot of people haven't had. I know we've all been in and seen scuffles between kids. These weren't like that. When these kids fought, nobody stopped them and they have absolutely no reason not to kill the other kid and even when they were small, they would just go and fight and fight and fight and sometimes, it was to the point where I watch fights that I couldn't break up



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and sometimes I didn't stop until somebody broke a bone and it was insane! That was something as an American kid, you're just growing up in a wonderful home, you weren't exposed to things like that and I know some people out there have probably experienced that type of lifestyle way more than I have but there I was. We had, the most grievous to me and the thing that I used martial arts training the most for was we had kids who would sexually assault other kids and we were a big part of doing our best to stop that and we had kids who tried to commit suicide. I experienced what it's like to tackle and disarm a knife from a kid who's desperately trying to kill themselves before you can stop them. Those memories are sobering and they stay with you forever and it was after that night, I remember generally, I remember sitting there and just talking to God and just thinking am I going to have to do this again tomorrow and the next day and the next day because these kids have no hope? This is real life. This is crazy and just being overwhelmed by that and it was that day that I said, you know what? I know exactly why I wanted to do martial arts. I know now because how in the world would I have known how to take that knife away from him without getting cut myself? How would I have known how to stop kids from attacking other kids? How would I have known how to talk to the little kids about the very, very basics of how to defend themselves, how to be aware of their surroundings? Look around, what to look for, what to think about, what to observe? All of those things. None of that. I wouldn't have had those skills. I wouldn't have had those assets and I remember writing in my journal, I don't care about black belt anymore because I learned everything I needed for being here and being used by God to help make even the slightest difference. That was when I went this is why I learned martial arts. Whatever else happens in life, this is why and this is worth it and I'm so thankful and that was truly the moment when I kind of let the dream of getting my black belt die and I went alright, I don't need that. I love what I've learned. I'm going to keep using what I've learned and now, I've just learned way, way more about self-defense than I ever would have dreamed in the dojo so, I know that is a very tough and sobering story. I could tell a lot of fun, happy ones but that is a big part of what makes me who I am today as an instructor.

Jeremy Lesniak:

There's not much I can say to follow onto that. I'm feeling a lot of emotion from what you said.

Jenni Siu:

As am I.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I can hear that and I appreciate your willingness to go there because I suspect there are people out there listening who have had, maybe not the same type of story but a similar response, a similar emotional response to things that have happened in and around their martial arts but hopefully, most people haven't and so, your ability to share that reminds people that even if you're not the one learning how to defend yourself because you need it, maybe you're teaching someone who needs it.



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Jenni Siu:

Absolutely and that is a perspective I take to class every single day is statistics alone tell us these kids are going to get attacked. Some of them, in one way or another, and our job is to do our very best. It's not a perfect world. We can't do a perfect job and that's something that's really hard to come to terms with sometimes but we can do our utmost and our very best to make sure that they're prepared to be safe.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Right on. Let's flip it around. Let's bring some smiles back in here.

Jenni Siu:

Sounds good to me.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I think we both need it. I'm guessing everybody listening does too.

Jenni Siu:

Indeed.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm going to be a little selfish here and normally, I don't talk about aspects to people's lives and training that I know, because the listeners don't, but I'm going to because I can because it's my show. I've had the pleasure of getting to know your husband a bit. He is one of the people who helps with some of the content we do here at whistlekick. He's the one in charge of martial arts radio live for those of you that don't know and I want to know more about you two because I know that your relationship and your faith and your martial arts bind you together. I've had conversations with him that hinted at that so I'm guessing that there's some good stuff in there so why don't you tell us about Gabe?

Jenni Siu:

Yeah, absolutely. He's my favorite person to talk about besides the little people that we have together but yeah, he is amazing and I'm sure you've gotten to know that, at least a little bit. So, I came back from Russia. They changed politically everything changed in Russia in 2008 so I had to leave. I was there for almost 4 years but I came back, went back to college, wanted to study more, learn more and I really wanted to study counselling so, as kind of an element to help out with what I already been working on, and I met Gabe there and he had come in as a student as well and he caught my eye. Mostly because every time I saw him, he was helping somebody. I came in as a student. Most people come to college, they're 18, they're 19, maybe 20. I was 26. I had just lived overseas, I had just lived a lot of hard years, good years but they were very hard and so, I wasn't into the whole run around and hang out and have a fun at college kind of scene. I was there to work, I was there to learn and then leave and then go be



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serious again. That doesn't mean that I didn't have a lot of fun. Just a little more sober than the average college student and one of the things that attracted me to Gabe was he was always working on something. He was always doing something, something important. At least that was my perception and we ended up really hitting it off. We worked for the same after school company. He was teaching guitar lessons and football and things and I was teaching introductory Karate and we got talking and it was one of those things where we sat down to talk for a few minutes, small chat and 4 hours later after telling each other our life stories and realizing that this is a neat guy, we built a friendship and our friendship was just really fun and very real and I loved that about him that I could just sit and be myself. I'm not a very, trying to look for the correct word, I'm a very simple girl. I put my hair in a ponytail, I throw on a hoodie and I do martial arts and I'm a kind of a take it or leave it kind of person and I appreciated that he enjoyed hanging out with me and was just like attracted to that and I was very attracted to him. 6 months after meeting, talking, getting to know each other, we started dating and a couple of weeks after that, we had picked out our wedding date and that probably will make people laugh but we were serious and he was actually, it's kind of fun to tell people this. He's my first boyfriend ever and I had a lot of guy friends and I had a lot of best friends that were guys but I'd never really been interested in anybody so that was actually surprising to me that our attraction grew so and like yeah, this guy is the one for me and as we got closer, I started to see some things that I hadn't seen before. Little red flags in his character and not to dishonor him in anyway, I saw some anger flare up where it was not exactly a just situation and that concerned me a little bit but not enough to really bring it up but I really prayed about that a lot and after that, after our semester was over, I went and worked up at Alaska for the summer and then, we both had the incredible privilege of spending the semester studying in Israel. That was an experience that it's not something many people get to have, to go spend 16 weeks in Israel studying. We got to go on hikes, we got to go see so many sights. Biblical sights everywhere. It was just incredible and Gabe was also a part of that group and we were dating, we were overseas. It was his first experience being overseas and I saw him go through some really intense things there. very, very intense culture shock. He was a person who really like to be in control of his life and obviously, being in the middle east and being overseas and being an international student, nothing is in control. Everything changes every 20 minutes and I had lived overseas for years and that's just kind of how it goes so I was kind of rolling with the punches, as it were but that was really, really hard for him and I remember hard, hard conversations for weeks. We would sit and we would talk for hours. Again, such a privilege that we could do that. He would be like man, I'm so out of control. I'm so, internally, I'm just a mess and you could see it on the external. He thought he was hiding it. I was like no, we all know you're struggling, man, and I prayed for him and my roommate was just precious and she prayed for him a lot but we had some really hard conversations and one of the things that I am so thankful for was that trip because God really changed Gabe's life in Israel and it's pretty clear that I'm a Christian and he had been raised in a Christian home but one of the things that he had realized in Israel was he just been playing the game, he's just been following the rules. Nothing had changed in his heart and nothing, in regards to our relationship with God had really, actually taken place and that, that trip was what it took for him to recognize that and I saw his life completely change and I can't describe to you the 180 that I saw him do



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in Israel and that was about halfway through our trip, little over halfway through our trip that God just changed his life and it was so beautiful and so, it was with joy when he proposed to me right before Christmas that year and I said absolutely. I am so excited to be your wife. I'm so excited to just be best friends forever and we got married the following May in 2010, almost 10 years ago and it has been amazing to just being married to my best friend. I had no idea how good marriage would be. I was perfectly content single. I think that was a gift as well but this is incredible. We have not had it easy but we've had each other and we have 3 amazing kids and they are just a joy and our family is just, man, what a gift. I had studied martial arts, he hadn't, he always wanted to. He did every other sport in the world and so, when I, it was about a year after we got married, I started teaching him a few things. I had taught him a little bit, here and there. Here's a stance, here's a punch, how to do a front kick, things like that but not formally. Not intentionally. I started teaching him and the church we were attending at that time, there was a bunch of kids there and I knew them but he didn't but he was getting to know them and a bunch of them were like oh, you should teach us Karate and before we knew it, we were in someone's basement with 25 kids and so, that was kind of our school's origin story. Just kind of started out I was teaching Gabe and he was helping me teach them even though he didn't know very much and as he learned, we had more and more in common. It was a struggle through different periods. To be his wife and to be his sensei. That is not an easy thing to kind of juggle both of those hats because in one moment, I'm saying hey, I want you to do this, this way and the other moment, we're just sitting having fun, hanging out as best friends and then back to being ok, no, that's not right, you got to fix this. You got to keep your hands up, whatever it is. He's gracious but that was challenging and frustrating for us. Particularly at different periods of training over the years and the fun part is through those years, we have resources as martial artists right now that I didn't have growing up and I think that they're underrated but highly valuable. We have the internet, we have YouTube, we have countless resources like whistlekick. You sit and listen to podcasts and you learn so much just from listening to an interview of somebody. I didn't have those kind of resources so Gabe has learned a ton as he's had time and as he's studied and I've continued to learn and we've brought that together and it's been really, really fun. We had an experience that I never dreamed we'd have this past August when a panel of amazing black belts who've become our friends, dear friends, they got together and they tested him for his black belt. That's something I couldn't do on my own and they tested me for my 2nd degree black belt and we were able to test together. That was incredible so we have been just so blessed in our martial arts and in our relationship. It continues to grow and as we teach together, we complement each other really well. He's just very, very exacting. He's very strict and yet, fun. I mean, I would be honest. I would have to be honest and say, our older, our more advanced students, they prefer learning under him because he is so detail-oriented. He's so good at taking their small, little inconsistencies and saying no, no, no. I see that. This is what you need to fix. This is what it needs to look like but also encouraging and for me, I would spend all day long with the little kids or with the brand new students, just setting that foundation and we both do both and we both complement each other really well and martial arts is just a way that, thankfully, I think could have driven a wedge between us but I think it does for some people but it's just God's grace that has brought us closer.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

Do you have advice for people who might be challenged teaching their spouse? Were there things you figured out through trial and error that made that easier?

Jenni Siu:

I think the challenge, yes, the biggest advice I can give is you know them much better than you're going to know any other student, really any student. Even your own child. Because kids are still developing, they're still growing. They still don't know their abilities, their skills. We often help them discover those but when you're teaching somebody who they are, an adult, they're very aware what they can and cannot do and you know them so well. My advice would be very, very careful with their heart. Yes, you're their sensei. Yes, you want them to do martial arts well but don't lose sight of the fact that they are a person that you are, you're there to protect their heart and so, balance. Balance it. Know when to say, ok, that's enough for the day. Let's just go have coffee. That's cool, you practice for a while, I'm not going to watch. Know when to encourage and know when to just say, I think I'm going to step back. Call me if you need me and I think that keeping the relationship as the most important thing and martial arts below that is probably something that's going to sound counterproductive especially if you really want to help them advance but my advice would be to always keep those priorities in order.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Make sense. Let's look ahead. Let's talk about the future. What has you excited about the future?

Jenni Siu:

Everything!

Jeremy Lesniak:

Alright, let's narrow that down to a little bit. When we talk about it from the context of, let's say, martial arts and training and the things that are in and around what we've talked about today, what are you excited about?

Jenni Siu:

I get excited about... I get excited to go teach every day. I'm excited about our school and its future. We just keep growing and we don't advertise. It's just kind of one of those things where we don't need to advertise. We don't have time to advertise so that has been a blessing. I know there are a lot of schools out there that are struggling so I am just grateful that currently, that's not something we're even thinking about. I am excited, extremely excited for our most advanced students who will soon be testing for brown belt. Looking ahead, I'm excited for when we have black belts in our system because currently, we have Gabe and I and that's it, as black belts. I'm excited to see what the future holds in regards to a tournament league that we're a part of. It just got up on off the ground a couple of years



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ago and we are working very hard to be as supportive as possible and as many ways as possible and I'm very much believing the people that are spearheading that and also just in the quality competition and so we're excited to see what the future holds for that and what our role in that may be. Excited to see my own kids come up through the program. Currently, they are extremely motivated and excited about it and I love that but yeah. For me, personally, I was honored for the opportunity to test for Nii-Dan, for 2nd degree black belt this year and in regards to my future aspirations of rank, I could care less. Truly. I know that sounds terrible but I love what I'm doing so much that I don't really see myself doing it any better by having another rank so that's not something I'm really focused on for myself. I am absolutely excited for Gabe to move up in rank and to outrank me some day. That has been a dream of mine for a long time because frankly, just in regards to physical capabilities, he's way better than I've ever been and I have a lot of physical limitations and that's ok. I can teach and it's my passion. It's what I love so looking ahead, I'm looking ahead at just getting better at teaching. Continuing to hone our program down to where some things we might add, some things we might take away. Just continuing to be able to adapt and make it as applicable and realistic as possible. Continuing to learn more and more about practical self-defense and I'm looking very much forward to our students being able to go out in the world and we got a couple of them who's said I'm going to go study Krav Maga next. I'm going to go do Jiu Jitsu next. I'm going to go do a really traditional hard style of Karate like Shotokan or something and just learn what we haven't learned because that's just not what we do. I'm excited for that. I'm excited for them to come back and maybe be better instructors than I've ever been so those are the things I'm looking ahead, I'm looking forward to and right now, in the day to day, I look forward to every class.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Awesome. Great. Great spirit. Now, if people want to find you or your school or any of that, social media-wise, email, websites, you got any of those?

Jenni Siu:

Yeah, we have Instagram for our school. It's @kicksKarateschool on Instagram. We currently don't have an open Facebook page that you could find. We may do that in the future soon but yeah, Instagram or email. If you want to email us, kicksKarateschool@gmail.com and that's pretty much it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Easy, easy enough. This has been fun so let's do the thing we do at the end and why don't you give us some parting words?

Jenni Siu:

Parting words, alright. You'll never know. You'll truly never know what sorts of situation you may need martial arts in even if you never get attacked. That may be because you learned martial arts. There's so much you learn through sparring, through kata, through whatever you're doing. There are so many skills



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that you learn that you don't even realize you're learning and that's the beauty of it. Being aware of your surroundings and being aware of your own abilities and inabilities and being able to pinpoint those. I have students who have come back and said I just knew something was wrong in fill in the blank, this situation and so I didn't go there and I find that to be just as valuable as a student who is physically attacked and able to get away safely. Absolutely. So, I guess my parting words would be study hard and know that the more you apply and the more you learn and the more questions you ask as long as it's asked from the true heart of wanting to learn and not just question everything, the more valuable your martial arts experience is going to be.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I had a lot of fun with this one. I've got a feeling, you could tell. I enjoy all of my conversations but the conversations that seem to bring me closer to the guest, people that I've enjoyed getting to know, people that I continue to get to know, there's a special place in my heart for those like today so thank you, Sensei Siu, for coming on. Thank you for sharing your family with everything that we're doing here and you know you've got my full support. If you want to check out the show notes, go to whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. Remember episode 464. It's where you'll find all kinds of stuff. Every single episode we've ever done and whistlekick.com is the place to go for everything else we do. Don't forget the code PODCAST15 if you're looking for maybe a uniform or a shirt or some protective equipment or a hat. There's all kinds of stuff over there and we're putting out new stuff all the time. There are a number of other ways you can support us beyond purchases. You can share an episode, you can leave us a review on Google, Facebook. You can follow us on social media, we are @whistlekick everywhere or you can contribute to the Patreon, patreon.com/whistlekick and if you spend \$5 or more per month, you're going to get more content. Yes, more! I am committed to giving you more all the time. If you've got a suggestion for a guest, reach out and if you want to email me, jeremy@whistlekick.com. Until next time, train hard, smile and have a great day!