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# Tradition of Champions

by Connie Kuzdym



Three generations of the Homann family involved in karate (from left): Brett and his wife, Kim, their daughter, Brooklyn, and Brett's father, Bill.  
Photo by Bob Wellinski

**W**hen “The Karate Kid” hit movie theaters back in 1984, Brett Homann was a teen and part of the U.S. Junior Karate Team. Ranked third in the country, he spent a month with his teammates in Japan, competing against top schools and earning a 12-2 record.

Today, Brett is a successful karate instructor. For the past 27 years, he has owned Homann Karate Dō in Crown Point. A year ago, he opened Homann Karate Dō Michigan City on Franklin Street. He believes Netflix’s “Cobra Kai,” the streaming sequel series to “The Karate Kid,” helped save the Crown

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Point site. Closing due to COVID-19, he switched to Zoom, but lost half the students. Upon reopening, several young people came in for the first time, having watched “Cobra Kai” and Homann Karate Do on Zoom, and were hooked. They enrolled, are still there and thriving.

For Brett, “The Karate Kid” connection came the eve of a competition, during a beach cookout with a Japanese team. Brett was out in the ocean, then felt a tap on his shoulder. He was handed a piece of paper that read, “Are you Johnny (Lawrence) from Karate Kid?”

“It was pretty funny,” Brett said. “I looked a lot like him. I had the blond hair, off to one side. I like to say he looked like me!”

The comparison between Brett and Johnny (actor William Zabka) ends with their looks. Brett can be ruthless in the ring, but his story is upbeat.

Brett’s father, Bill, ran a successful dojo near the current Michigan City location in the early 1970s through the 1990s. Not having a babysitter, Bill brought his 4-year-old with him to work.

When Brett talks about his dad and their journey together, it is with a mixture of love, respect and laughter.

“Where kids rebel and fight against things like this...it was just me and him,” Brett said. “It was a thing we had together, a bond. We still have that bond. He was my best man at my wedding...this has been a thing that has kept us together.”

As one might expect, his dad was tough on him, being the instructor’s son. He was never “given” anything. He understands what this



Brett (right) as a youngster, in action.

did for him, crediting his charisma and success to his father.

“Every test was harder...he pushed me harder than everyone...he was my biggest cheerleader,” Brett said. “He was like, man, that was so amazing...wow, that was awesome, good job way to go...My dad was always in my corner doing whatever he could to make sure he supported me, and pushed me.”



Brett (left) at 16, having returned from Japan with the U.S. Junior Karate Team.

Brett carried that feeling with him. The better he became, the more he loved karate. He received his first-degree black belt at 16.

Brett’s talent became evident with success on national and international levels. His training schedule consisted of running five miles a day, training six days a week, four to five hours a day.

During his competitive years, he won a U.S. national championship. At the time, he was the youngest and only fighter, at 17, competing in and winning the 21-35 age division. In Greece and Dominican Republic, he claimed first place undefeated and won MVP at the Greece tournament. Costa Rico garnered him a 1st 75 kilo, 1st open division and 2nd team kumite (training against an adversary). He was undefeated and participated in two Pan American Championships, where he had two fifth-place finishes and third-team kumite. He also was one of the first practi-

tioners to train at the Olympic Training Center for Karate in Colorado Springs, Colo.

Brett had a single injury in competition from a Costa Rican fighter — a cheap shot to the nose.

“He got penalized for the illegal hit, but he broke my nose in the finals,” Brett said. “I was supposed to fight another guy from Costa Rica. If I couldn’t fight...I would have to forfeit and his guy would automatically get first place. I taped my nose, fought that guy and won the entire tournament.”

While in the stands, Bill interjected, some 20,000 people from Costa Rica and the surrounding area were booing Brett. Afterward, while on the podium with The National Anthem playing, the crowd cheered for him.



This provided photo shows Brett (far right) competing in a tournament.

Brett and Bill’s ultimate goal was the Olympics. In 1992, it seemed karate would be accepted as a sport. Being ranked No. 1 and No. 2 in the nation in two different weight classes for the Senior National Team, he trained as if he would be selected. Unfortunately, athletes around the world had their hopes dashed when the sport was denied entrance to the Barcelona games.

Europe and South America consider karate a sport. Karate tournaments are televised and sanctioned sports by universities, while athletes are compensated for competing. U.S. athletes must find their own sponsors to help defray traveling expenses. When it became exceedingly difficult to find backers, Brett retired from competition in 1995.

With optimism, Brett shifted gears and began walking in his dad’s footsteps, in search of a location to open his own dojo. He and a friend found a building with boarded-up windows and a for-rent sign in Crown Point. Typically, landlords hesitate to rent to karate schools, the perception being walls will be kicked down and the building destroyed. Undeterred, Brett called. The landlord’s response:

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“That’s funny, it used to be a karate school.”

A surprised Brett simply replied, “Wow!”

Talk about Karma!

Some minor modifications were made to the 1,100-square-foot space, adding mats and other sundry items. In 1996, Brett opened Homann Karate Dō.

Brett’s future wife, Kim, and her girlfriends became students at the school. While the others peeled off, Kim trained five days a week. She grew to know Brett, the parents and students well, which in time became a blessing.



Brett and Kim, pictured at the Michigan City dojo, met when she was a student at his karate school.  
Photo by Bob Wellinski.

Kim earned her elementary education degree, was enrolled in a master’s program and ready to attend night classes. Brett, on the other hand, was moving to a 7,000 square foot location, on the square, in Crown Point. (Eventually, he would surprise Kim by proposing during a private lesson surrounded by family and friends.) A little over a month after opening, dojo enrollment soared from 60 to 150 students.

Until then, Brett was the only instructor. With the influx of students, naturally, he felt overwhelmed. The decision was made to divide and conquer. Brett took the older kids, Kim taught the kid’s classes. She had never actually taught karate, but Kim had a black belt and experience working with children.

Kim did not pursue her master’s degree. From that point, she was committed to the business. She

eventually created her own niche program: a class for 3- to 4-year-olds known as the Little Ninja’s. Punching shapes and colors, they learn about danger, agility, right hand left hand.

Ten years ago, the couple designed a facility in the Crown Point Sports Complex to specifically suit their needs. With the Crown Point school thriving, Brett’s student, John Zurisk, wanted to run a karate school. In partnership, they opened Zurisk Karate Academy on Franklin Street, next to Magro’s Family Shoe Store. John ran the school until he received a promotion, and different responsibilities at his day job left no time to teach karate, so the school closed.

When the time came last year for Brett and Kim to open a second location, after due diligence, they realized Michigan City was the best place. They reopened the doors of the former academy, fulfilling Brett’s dream of owning two schools.

“Our program is a really good program for making good kids... We thought that this (Michigan City) would be a good community to put our program in to really help.” Brett said. “At Crown Point...we’ve helped mold some great kids to be really successful in life outside of karate, through respect, discipline, hard work, goal setting. That’s our structure, our program.

What’s it like for Brett to come full circle and be down the street from his dad’s former place?

“I’m excited,” Brett said. “The kids I have right now that are in our program, I have so much optimism. I have really good families that are very supportive of what we are doing...every day it’s growing, we’re pleased.”

Students can attend classes between two to four days; however, they are attending the maximum

amount. To Brett, that shows enthusiasm and excitement.

“We work hard, but we try to make it fun. I’m very supportive, to where it’s about really trying to build kids up,” Brett said. “When they know they have that support, they have that belief in them... Then, kids believe in themselves more and they’ll put more effort into it and excel. That’s ultimately what we want to see, kids growing and excelling every day.”

These days, Brett splits his time between Crown Point and Michigan City. He credits amazing instructors at both schools that allow him to float between the two.

Brett’s staff in Michigan City includes his dad’s former students, George Chism (6th Degree Black Belt) and Russell Parker (5th Degree Black Belt). Both



Brett says his father, Bill, has supported him from Day One.  
Photo by Bob Wellinski.

started karate with Bill at the Michigan City dojo in the early 1970s and with Nick Ignatuk a national karate champion from the Crown Point location.

Brett is excited about doing interschool tournaments and workouts together and building lasting friendships. At a tournament and pool party, this past year, that is exactly what happened.

“Pretty much the entire Michigan City school was at that tournament,” Brett said. “All the parents were there supporting it. Kids were going out to dinner afterwards. It was like a big family.”

□

As with many longtime couples, Brett’s and Kim’s conversation weaves in and out. One answering for the other, answering together, love and support flowing between them.

Asked if she has entertained the notion of completing her master’s degree, husband and wife resoundingly answer no. Kim is happy with where she is today. She is a 5th degree black belt and still works out three days a week. Her top priority is raising their 7-year-old daughter, Brooklyn, being available to take and enjoy their daughter’s involvement in various activities.

These days, her role at the school is the accounting and administrative end. That instantly brings out Kim’s teasing response, “He gets to be more fun!” Brett heartily laughs, saying with conviction, “She’s the glue.”

They hope their daughter will follow in the family footsteps. Once a super shy child, handed a challenging health issue from the start, karate is giving her the confidence to blossom. Her parents will not force her to compete, though, but instead offer gentle pushes as they see her potential.

Kim and Bill agree with Brett’s comment that they have witnessed how karate changes children’s lives, growth that made them positive and successful. Because of that, all three agree it is out of the question for Brooklyn to quit karate until she is 18 and earns her black belt.

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Brett believes she will not want to quit.

“That was me. I got so good I couldn’t quit and now I can’t quit...now it would be a waste of all my years of knowledge, experience, ability that I’ve invested into it,” he said.

It Brooklyn becomes an elite-level athlete, he will be open to invest his time and effort for her to become part of the U.S. Karate Team’s coaching staff.

□

The Crown Point slogan, “Tradition of Champions,” is simply what the dojo represents. Well-known in the area, Kim and Brett explain with a laugh that at tournaments people are heard saying, “Oh, he’s a Homann person.” Both acknowledge it has taken a lot of work and dedication to get to this point.

“It’s inspiring to have other people, especially coaches, saying...I love watching your fighters fight, they are amazing...you always produce these really great students,” Brett said.

Brett has actively trained five days a week for 48 years. His lifelong contributions to the sport, his years of experience, how he has changed student lives, were recognized in September when he received his 10th degree black belt, making him a grand master.

“It’s a real honor to get the 10th degree, as there

## More about Karate

According to Brett and Kim, the goal of karate is self-defense and self-development. It is about the search for one’s perfection of character and discipline.

Everyone has a different reason for doing karate. There are athletic students, shy ones, autistic children and those who have been bullied. Some do it to compete, others wanting to learn self-defense and self-discipline.

Karate means empty hand and do means way. In America, the do was dropped and called karate. In Japan, it’s actually Karate Do in that empty hand way. It’s more of using hand and feet, high sweeps and throws.

Karate training is divided into three segments: *Kihon* (basic techniques), or the foundation of Japanese martial arts. *Kihon* not only involves practicing the techniques, but also fosters the correct spirit and attitude at all times. *Kata* (form) is a detailed pattern of martial arts movements practiced to memorize and perfect the movements being executed. *Kumite* (grappling hands) refers to forms of sparring and is the fighting segment of karate.

The object of karate is to defeat your opponent through punches, kicks and throws to score points. At the end of a karate *kumite*, the competitor with



Brett says he will support his daughter, Brooklyn, with her interests in karate. Photo by Bob Wellinski.

aren’t many in the world,” Brett said. “You can’t get it with 25 years of karate. It’s a lifer. You don’t do it to defend yourself anymore. It’s a lifestyle. It’s part of who you are. I don’t do

drugs, drink, smoke. I try to make good choices. I try to be a good role model to kids. It’s a lifestyle that becomes a part of who you are.”

Brett’s positive, enthusiastic love for his sport, schools and students is still heard in his voice and seen in his body language.

“I feel blessed that I’ve been able to do a sport... my whole life that I really love, that’s changed kids’ lives. I’m pretty blessed for what I’ve been able to do,” Brett said.

“I’ve seen kids where they are this tumbling off balance, kind of shy kid, and then I turn them into this confident, very strong, powerful, disciplined, hardworking, goal-setting, oriented kid that has a very successful life in the future...I love seeing growth. I love seeing their life change like it did for me. Karate saved me and gave me purpose and it changed my life. And that’s what I want to give to other kids. I want to give back.”

the most points or an 8-point lead over an opponent is declared the winner.

As well as being a combative physical activity, karate is highly skilled and tactical, and all competitors are required to have a high level of skill, experience, speed and dexterity to be successful in a karate competition.

Competitors are placed into categories according to their weight and age in the case of junior competitions. They wear a traditional karate suit known as a *gi*, instead of wearing the belt color that signifies their rank. One contestant wears a red belt and the other a blue belt. Karate *kumite* matches take place on a matted square of 8m x 8m, with an additional 1m on all sides called the safety area.

Tournaments use karate point fighting instead of free, full-contact sparring for obvious reasons. The goal is not to incapacitate the opponent, but to score the most points, which requires the fighter to have excellent technique, quickness, patience and balance.

The World Karate Federation, the only karate governing body recognized by the International Olympic Committee, oversees the sporting side of the martial art hosting competitions around the world.