

Love What You Love Podcast

Episode 2: Martial Arts with Cindy Villanueva

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Hey, I'm Julie Rose and this is *Love What You Love*, a podcast about the wonderful and sometimes weird things people are absolutely passionate about. They are always a unique expression of curiosity, and joy, and wonder, and the world needs a hell of a lot more of that right now. So, every other week I'll introduce you to another fascinating human who is into really interesting stuff.

Before we get into it, a quick note that you can find the podcast on Instagram [@LoveWhatYouLovePod](#); on Twitter [@WhatYouLovePod](#); and the website is [LoveWhatYouLovePod.com](#). Also, this episode was recorded before the lockdown, and what we talk about will still be relevant after, but stick around to the end of the show for ideas on how to get involved at home.

You know, you just never know about people. Like, you never know just by looking at them what their backstory is; what they've done, what they're capable of. This is not a lead-in to a true crime episode, I promise. Take Cindy Villanueva for example. She's a teacher and a marketing expert with impeccable taste in clothes and expensive taste in shoes. And she will not kill me for saying that; it's true. She's a mother and a grandmother, funny and warmhearted. She can also break three bricks straight through with her bare hand. Cindy is a sixth-level blackbelt, a master instructor, and honestly, an all-around badass. So let's find out why Cindy loves the martial arts and why you might learn to love them too.

Julie: So, you and I have known each other a very long time.

Cindy: We have!

Julie: And one of the things I know about you is that you are a very focused and very driven individual. You love a lot of things, but what I know is that you really love martial arts.

Cindy: I do!

Julie: And what I want to understand is: Where did that come from? Why martial arts? And maybe you can give a little background on who you are and what your day persona is.

Cindy: Yeah! Martial arts is not anything I ever in a million years thought about doing. It's not something I did as a child. I grew up in San Jose, California, born and raised, to a very middle-class family. My dad had been a migrant farmworker from Mexico. My mom was a stay-at-home mom, and we were really into sports. I swam competitively for about ten years, did Girl Scouts, grew up in a very traditional kind of family. But when my children were 8, 10, and 14 - and they were all at private school, nice little kids - my daughter got into, sort of, a silly girl push fight at school. It wasn't anything big, but my parents flipped out. And they said, "The kids need to know how to protect themselves. Find a good martial arts school and we'll pay for the first year."

So I said okay, and I started looking around at martial arts schools in San Jose. I found the Ernie Reyes organization and really, really was impressed with them because they weren't just about kicking and punching. They were really about leadership, and integrity, and honor, and all of those kinds of things that you want for your children. So I got them started in it, and they were probably, maybe, purple belts, so they'd been in it for several months. And I would come to class, and I would sit with all the other moms, and I would watch, and there was one instructor who kept coming over to me and saying, "You know you want to get out there." I was

like, “No... “ I'm in my 30s, I haven't worked out in a long time, and I'm just here to watch my kids. And she's like, “You want to get out there!”

So in our association we have blackbelts tests twice a year and they take place in San Jose. I took the kids to go see a blackbelt test. We thought that would be really cool. I saw women my age testing for blackbelt! And I thought, “You know, I've been an athlete all my life, and I've kind of really gotten into this, watching the kids and really enjoying it.” So I signed up the following Monday, and that was 25 years ago. [laughs]

Julie: Oh my god! So you are now... What level blackbelt are you?

Cindy: I have a sixth-degree blackbelt.

Julie: I mean, I presume that is super high and impressive! But I don't know what that means, so can you explain what that means?

Cindy: Yeah. Just to give it a little context, my Great Grandmaster, Ernie Reyes Sr., he is going to be 73 years old next week and will be testing for his tenth-degree blackbelt. That kind of gives you an idea of where I am in the spectrum.

Julie: Got it. So you started when you were in your 30s, and you are now a sixth-level blackbelt.

Cindy: That's right.

Julie: And you own your own studio.

Cindy: Yeah, which is crazy! Never in a million years thought about doing that. Grandmaster Reyes and our co-founder, Tony Thompson, asked us to consider opening a school. You know, there's a karate school on every corner; the market's really saturated. And if you're a parent, and you've got a 5-year-old, say, you don't know the difference between one school or the other. You go and you look, kids are going, “Aiyah! Aiyah!” It's hard to know what's a great school unless you really, kind of, dig in. So my training is in martial arts, but my academic training is in business, and so we worked up the business plan, did all the research. We moved here, built a home, built a school, and we opened the first and only Ernie Reyes school in Texas in July of 2007.

Julie: From the first class you took in martial arts to opening your own school, how many years was that?

Cindy: Let's see... I started in 1994 and opened my school in 2007.

Julie: Wow. Becoming a sixth-level blackbelt, you obviously love doing it. What does it take to achieve something like that? Obviously, having the love, but what else is involved in... I mean, that's a freaking amazing accomplishment! How do you get there?

Cindy: Really good question. A lot of it, particularly once you get to my age... And I'll tell you, I'm 58 years old. Once you get to this age, you know, I'm not doing the pop-up spinning wheels kicks, or the 540s, or any of that crazy stuff that some of the younger kids are doing. It really does become a discipline of your mind, and your body of course. I'm not 300 pounds, eating bonbons, sitting and watching the kids do martial arts. I'm training. But it really does... I look at my Great Grandmaster and he is... like I said, he'll be 73 next week, and he has cancer, and you watch him... The days that you wake up and you're sore, or you're tired, or you're unmotivated, and you think about him and you go, “Get out of bed! Get on the mat. Get it done.” It's virtually impossible to be lazy when you have a role model like that. He is so inspiring, so amazing.

But even in the absence of that, for me it's really wanting to be better than I was yesterday. And that doesn't necessarily mean that I'm kicking higher or punching harder than I did yesterday, it's: As a human being, am I a better person today than I was yesterday? I don't have a worldwide platform, but I have a school of 100 families, and to the degree that I'm able, am I being a great role model for the 4-year-old Little Dragon? And the 40-year-old adult student who is coming in and saying, "I always wanted to take martial arts." or, "I took martial arts when I was 7 but I never got my blackbelt and I'd like to try it again," am I being a great role model? That has not always been easy, and sometimes being a driven person actually means I'm being a poor role model.

I've had times... I'll be honest, I have a lot of injuries, and they're not martial arts related. I have a congenital problem with my joints. I have bad arthritis. When I was 48 I had a knee replacement, so I have one titanium knee. In November I had one of my shoulders replaced. So I'm working my way towards the Wolverine kind of thing. But, I haven't always been a great patient, and there've been times when I've pushed myself beyond, really, what was intelligent. As a consequence, I've had times where... I've had students where I've seen them pushing too hard, and I've said, "Hey, dial that back a little bit." And they've looked at me and called me out, saying, "Really, Kwan Jang Nim, from you? That's the advice from *you*?" So I've had to learn over these 25 years that sometimes, really, restraint is the better part of valor.

Julie: So, it takes a lot of focus, and determination, and mental strength, but where in all of this do you get joy?

Cindy: That's a great question. For me, I can't say that I get a ton of joy by, you know, getting the next stripe on my belt. There's a sense of accomplishment, and I don't want to diminish that. There's a deep sense of accomplishment. I look around and I see women my age who are... They're old. And I'm not. There's a deep sense of contentment and accomplishment there. Where I get joy is when I have... I'll give you a quick story.

I have a woman who is... she's now a third-degree blackbelt, but years ago she came to me, and her sons were taking martial arts, and she wanted to take my cardio kickboxing classes, just to cross train, just for working out. Great. She takes cardio. After a while she's like, "Hey, do you need extra teachers? I'd love to teach cardio!" So she started teaching a couple days a week. Then one evening she came to me, and she was in tears, and I said, "Oh my gosh! What's wrong?" She said, "I'm so embarrassed. I really want to take martial arts, but I think I'm too old!" I said, "Are you kidding me??!" She was 40! You've got to be kidding me. You're not too old! Of course not.

And she said, "I didn't take it as a child... I haven't even told my husband this! It's something I really want to do." And I said, "You know what? If you want to get on this mat and you want to train, I will train you." And I did. She now has three stripes on her belt! She's 50 years old. And I don't know if I can say this on your podcast: She's a total badass!

I couldn't be more proud. *That's* where I get a lot of joy. I get a lot of joy when I see kids who are on the spectrum, and who have parents who come to me and say, "My child has been kicked out of 13 different activities. We're kind of at the last straw. We're trying to find something that he can do." And he comes here, and he succeeds, and he has a smile on his face, and he's having a good time. That brings me joy. Martial arts truly is not just kicking and punching. Yes, come here, this isn't chess club. This isn't knitting club. You're going to get hit. You're going to punch. You're going to cry, sweat, bleed a little bit. It's going to happen. But it's all about digging deep and finding that place inside of you that you didn't think you could go.

I have one blackbelt who started with me as a Little Dragon. She is now a sophomore at Texas A&M. She's a fourth-degree blackbelt. She joined the Judo Club at A&M, so she's training in judo now. She told me when she did her fourth-degree blackbelt test, "You know what? I never had any idea that I was as strong as I was. It pushed me beyond what I thought I could do." That is what brings me to tears. That's what brings me joy.

Julie: And you've had, over the course of 15 years or whatever, you've had hundreds and hundreds of students, right?

Cindy: Yes. I've graduated over 60 blackbelts.

Julie: What!

Cindy: Yeah! And many of them with multiple degrees. Now, we have two blackbelt tests a year, but we have a mastery test every four years, and that's a big freaking deal. Like I said, Great Grandmaster Reyes will be testing for his tenth-degree in June. All the school owners, and all the head instructors, the senior people all test every four years.

Julie: Can you talk about this mastery test? Because I've known you a long time, and I've known you prepping for that, and frankly it sounds like hell. What is it, and why do you do it?

Cindy: [laughs] Yeah, it is hell! And when you're in the middle of it you're like, "Why am I doing this!" And the second it's over, you're like, "Man, that was the best thing I've ever done in my entire life!"

I'll give you a glimpse of the last one I did, in 2016, when I tested for my sixth-degree blackbelt. The regular blackbelt test is, like, a day or day-and-a-half long. For the mastery test, our test was six days. We started on Monday night. What happens is you get a list of stuff that you're supposed to bring, so you have to have this whole thing packed *really* compactly because there are... at that point I think we had 175 mastery testers. So you've got your duffel bag, your sleeping bag, you wear camos and a t-shirt, and every single day you have no idea what you're going to do. You have a certain amount of curriculum that you are going to get tested on; all of your forms, and your jiu-jitsu, and your sticks, and all that kind of stuff, you're going to get tested on. But really, what the mastery test is about is testing your strength of character, and your mind, and your fortitude. So on Tuesday of that week...

And I should say, you don't eat very much, so you're allowed to bring cans of tuna, or chicken, you can bring garbanzo beans, black beans, green beans, canned, that sort of thing. You get plain rice cakes, water, sometimes we get fruit. So, that Tuesday morning we got a bottle of water and a rice cake. We did a bunch of curriculum. Then you're on teams. You find out what team you're on, and it's a really cool teambuilding situation. I was on the Foxtrot Team. There's 12 people on your team, you get in your van, and the vans are blacked out. They black out the windows except, obviously, for the driver, so you have no idea where you are or what you're doing.

So they get their driving instructions, we get in all these vans, and we start driving. We end up at the Presidio. So we get out... And that day I was wearing some leggings, and a t-shirt, and tennis shoes. So we get to the Presidio, and you get out, and they put three teams together, so now you're 36 people. They said, "Okay, sign this waiver." And you're like, "I have no idea what's coming, but okay!" The thing is, for me, being the age that I was, I knew I was going to be the oldest person on my team, and I think the youngest person on my team was late 20s. So here I'm 54, and I was determined...

My mental thinking was: No matter what we do, I'm doing it. Because in the mastery workouts you always are given the opportunity, like, you can back out. If something's too scary, or you think it's going to be too hard, or you have an injury, or whatever, there's other things that you can do. I was determined that no matter what we did, I was doing it, and that I was not going to have a situation where my team was thinking, "Oh great, we got stuck with the grandma!" That was my mindset, and that whatever we did, I was going to take extra turns... I was just going to be *in it*.

So we walk down to the beach, we're maybe 50 yards from the water. This is July in San Francisco, so of course it's nice and warm outside but you know what that water's like. We get to the sand and there are these huge logs, and each one of these logs weighs between 350 and 420 pounds. So they show us how eight to ten of us are going to pick up this log and put it in your shoulder and how you walk with it. At this point I hadn't had my shoulders fixed. I had bone spurs in both of my shoulders that stick up. So this is awesome. You're picking up this log and putting it down. Okay. Now they tell you, "All right, whatever your leader says, this is what you're going to do for the rest of the day." He says, "You have three minutes, run down to the ocean, dive in, get back up here, pick up your log. Move. Go!"

So you just bolt! You just run. And some people are, like, tip-toeing. Oh heck no. You've got to dive in. You're fully clothed – backpack on, everything - dive in, get out, run back up the sand, and pick up this log. We literally walked that log through the city of San Francisco for *hours*. You have this whole big team... Oh, I should mention that there are two logs per team, so most of your team is carrying logs. The people who aren't are jogging behind you, and then you rotate out. Over the hours you, kind of, develop a system of how you tap in, how you tap out.

At one point we get to a street where... And people are driving by, and walking by, and looking at you like you're absolutely insane. So we get to this point, the light turns green, the first log goes across, the light turns red. Our log is on one side of the street, the other log's on the other side of the street. And the Green Beret is *screaming* at us, "You don't leave your team! They just got ambushed! Now you have casualties!" So we get across the street and they pull out a stretcher. And these stretchers are heavy! The metal poles, and then they have, like, this canvas thing. So they take a person – who's not a small person, one of the bigger guys – stick him on the stretcher, so now you have six people who have to carry the stretcher, then you have at least eight people, sometimes ten, on either one of the logs. So now there's only a few people who are rotating in and out, so you're taking more turns.

So we're going through this whole thing, we get to this one point, and I don't remember what street it was on, but we stopped at this point, got to drop the logs, and we had to do burpees, and then we had to do kicking things... You know, we're on the ground doing leg kicks and everything. And there's this flight of stairs... it's really probably two flights of stairs going up to the next street. I don't remember where we were. So we set the logs down and we have to crabwalk up these two flights of stairs and then bunny hop down the flights of stairs.

So we get down and he's like, "All right, pick up your logs and carry the logs upstairs." Like, what?? We ended up carrying that damn log ten miles. We finally get to this big lot and everybody's able to put the logs down, "Okay, you're done with the logs, say goodbye to the logs." Oh, I forgot something. We had to load up our backpacks with rocks or sand so that we were carrying heavy weight. Yeah. Minor detail. [laughs]

At any rate, we get to the point where we drop the logs and we're like, "Okay, we're running back to the Presidio. Double time. Let's go." So we're jogging to the Presidio, we get back

there, everybody's high-fiving, "We did it!" You know, it's getting later in the evening. It's getting cold. You're still wet, no jackets, but whatever, everybody's high-fiving. And then suddenly we look around and we're like, "Wait a minute. Where's the vans?" There's no vans here. And they look at us and go, "Did you think you were done? We're not done. We're running across the Golden Gate Bridge."

Oh! Awesome! You should know that the Golden Gate Bridge is almost three miles across. So now we're jogging across the Golden Gate Bridge. You've got to imagine, people are dropping like flies. It's amazing how the 18-year-olds now are dropping like flies. So, consequently... Here's the thing, nobody gets left behind. You stay together as a team, so you're jogging but you're basket-carrying some people who just can't do it. And then you're swapping out because you obviously can't run three miles basket-carrying somebody.

So I ended up being chosen to, like, bring up the rear and make sure that we all stayed together and nobody got left behind. So, you're hollering at people, kindly. You know everybody's dying, we've been doing this all day long. Keep in mind, we had a rice cake and a bottle of water that morning, that was it.

Finally we get across, it's nighttime, it's nine o'clock in San Francisco. You're still wet, you're sweaty but your clothes are wet from jumping in the ocean. I have never been that cold in my entire life. We finally get lined up and they give us this patch that, you know, We Made It. And it's like, nothing is more important to me in my entire life. "My first born isn't as important to me as that patch is!" because you just accomplished the most difficult thing you've ever done in your life.

Julie: And that was Day One!

Cindy: That was Day Two of the test. We still had the rest of the week to go.

Julie: Oh my god. So that... Obviously, you love this because otherwise... Or you're insane. Or both.

Cindy: [laughs] Maybe a little of both.

Julie: So what questions does this answer for you?

Cindy: Such a good question. It really answers the question of, for me: What am I capable of? My first-degree blackbelt test, I was... You're going to see a theme here. I was going through a divorce, and for me, training was just a way to take my mind off what was going on and to just, you know, release some endorphins, release some frustration. So, going through the first-degree test, everybody says, "Hey, when you go through it, at some point you're going to cry." And I was like, "You can't make me cry! There's no way in hell I'm crying at this test."

So we go through the whole test... Actually, about two weeks before the test my soon-to-be ex-husband calls me up and he's screaming at me over the phone. He's like, "I can't believe you're going to go through with this, and if you get hurt don't expect me to pay for you... you're going to have to take care of yourself..." It was really ugly. I ended up hanging up on him. It was just awful.

So I go through the test, best experience of my entire life, I'm on fire. I ended up getting a Best Tester Award in my division. Everything is clicking; I break all my boards, everything goes great. At the end of the test, before you go outside to do two hours of conditioning, if you're 18 or over you have the option to break a brick. And you break one for every degree that you're going to be, so I only needed to break one. But I had never broken a brick in my life.

Now, this isn't, like, a red brick. This is the thinner gray bricks. So they're bringing groups up on stage, in a group at a time. So Grandmaster Reyes starts talking and he says, "Okay, if you're going to break, you need to get in line, and you're going to come up here and break. It's not required but it's optional if you want to do this..." Nobody's going to write this on their résumé. This isn't something that's a professional kind of deal. This has to be a personal thing. "Use this as a metaphor. Maybe there's something in your life that you need to break through. Maybe there's a relationship you need to break through." And I was like, "Oh, give me the damn brick!"

When he first announced that we were breaking bricks, the first thing that popped in my head was my husband's voice: What if you get hurt? I'd seen people break their hands on bricks, but then when he said that I was like, "No, gimme the brick!" So I got up, I went in line, and I'm thinking, "I don't even know what to do." So I'm watching everybody who's ahead of me who's breaking successfully, so okay, I'm going to use a palm strike.

I get up there, and I'm nervous but I've had this amazing day. The entire day has been just fantastic. Everything has gone right. I'm standing there, getting ready to break, and he says Go, and I kihap, and I didn't even feel the brick. My hand actually hit the floor, which is not the right way to break; it's too much. But I went right through the brick. And I will say, that was the only time all day I cried, because it was in that moment that I realized: There's nothing I can't do. There is absolutely nothing that I can't do.

And I'm a woman of faith, so for me it was definitely a God moment, where between him and me, you know what, there's nothing that I can't do. That's the thing I tell my students. I can teach you technique, I can kick you in the butt, what I can't give you is that sense of accomplishment that you have from knowing that you have pushed yourself beyond what you thought you could do. I can't give that to you. I can take you up to that point. You have to take it. You have to grab that. You have to want it so badly that you will grab it. Then once you experience it once, you will never, ever lose that. No one can take that from you. You can steal all six of my blackbelts, but nobody can take away from me that feeling that I had breaking that first brick, breaking six bricks after my six-degree test, carrying that damn log all day long. Nobody can take that away from me. Those are things that have become part and parcel of who I am.

And they translate, not just when I'm standing on the mat. They translate when I'm standing in front of a room giving a presentation, or when I'm leading a team, or when I'm doing anything that is hard. I know: I've done X and it felt so good to be on the other side of it, so because I did That Thing, I know I can do This Thing. That is a gift that martial arts has given me that I can give my students, up to a certain point. But I tell their parents too: Don't make this easy for them. If you do, you will rob them of that feeling that is just... You can hear me getting excited about it. Once you've had that experience, there's nothing like it. You'll want more of it.

Julie: What frustrates you about it? I know at the top of your list is going to be injuries, but besides injuries, what frustrates you about martial arts? About pursuing that?

Cindy: It's still definitely very male dominated. When I was married and we owned the school together, you know, you go to tournaments and people automatically would look at him. We were the exact same belt rank, both of us, 50-50 partners in this business, where it's just assumed that... Or, if you tell somebody that you own a martial arts school, then they'll ask you, "Oh, so do you do martial arts too?" So that's a little bit frustrating. It's still definitely very male dominated.

But one of the things I'm super proud of is, in our association, like I said there's over 40 schools, only three of our schools are women-only owned. There's a couple that are husband and wife, but I'm one of only three women-only owned businesses.

The other thing that's frustrating to me, and you kind of alluded to it, is the injury thing. Because I just had shoulder replacement on one of my shoulders, and I have to have shoulder replacement on the other one, I am done advancing. I am not able to go to the mastery test in June, and I am definitely going through grieving. I'm not going to lie, it's rough. But I am pouring myself into my students who *are* going to mastery; reframing all the energy and passion I would pour into my own training and pouring it into them to make sure they can be the very best that they can be.

Julie: Would you say that because of your, kind of, genetic issues with your joints and your arthritis, that you were more prone to get injured? I'm just curious about what the injury rate is for martial arts.

Cindy: That's a really good question, because if there are any parents who are listening to this who are wondering about putting their kids in... It's funny. I do have parents asking me. They see me walking around after the surgery in a sling going, "Is that a martial arts injury??!" No, it's not. If I had been, like, a competitive knitter, all of this would have happened. It's just degenerative, and it's unfortunate. Maybe it was accelerated a little bit from martial arts, mostly because I haven't been a great patient. But no, it doesn't have anything to do with it, and I will say, probably martial arts has saved me in some respects because I do train so hard, because I work out. Musculature is fine. It's just the joint.

Julie: Ah man, that's frustrating.

Cindy: You know, it's also character building, I think. Trying to look at that silver lining, like, I am now going to learn new lessons.

Julie: Are there people that would not be a good fit for martial arts? Or would you say that anybody could try it?

Cindy: You know what? At the risk of sounding like a marketing plug, anybody can try it. I think anybody can get something out of it. If you are someone who has traditionally done team sports and you're not sure about the individual aspect of it, you know, you're taking class with other people who are at your belt level, and you form friendships that are lifelong.

So, from a kid perspective, I think anybody can do it. It's great for teaching them... I don't want to sound regimented, but self-discipline, and respect, and focus, those kinds of things are great. But for an adult, it's a wonderful way to... You know, you get stressed out, you go, you kick, you punch, and it's okay. You can kick or punch somebody and it's okay. I would say anybody, really, would get something from it. Now, some people are going to do better at it than others, but I think everybody can get something out of it.

Julie: If you had one wish about martial arts, or your involvement in it, what would it be?

Cindy: The thing that jumps to my mind is that I wish I'd started it earlier. But I don't know that I necessarily do. I think I started it just at the right time. Being an adult, and doing it with my children, I think... gosh, that's a tough question. I will say this, I think with martial arts, what I wish I had done is taken better care of myself sooner.

Julie: Before you started martial arts or during the process?

Cindy: Before, that maybe I had started getting my knees fixed, or doing some things that would've given me a little bit more longevity, although I can't complain about 25 years, right?

Julie: Right, right. 25 years of doing something, it shows commitment and love. That's impressive.

If a listener is new to martial arts and they want to get involved, what's the best way to start?

Cindy: Do You Research! It's so easy to go to the one that's closest to you, but you want to make sure... because every discipline is different, and every school is different. So, do a little bit of research around the discipline. For example, when I first started out, I did Taekwondo. The Ernie Reyes Organization was a Taekwondo school, so my first degree blackbelt is in Taekwondo. It's mostly kicking, so if you have bad hips or bad knees, Taekwondo's probably not going to be your best choice. If you have bad shoulders, or a bad back, some of those kind of issues, Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu may not be your best choice.

If you don't really want a hard style, go into something that's a softer style. Go into Tai Chi. Do Wing Chun. Do something different. Think about the different styles. That may seem like a lot to do, but a brief Google search on the different types of martial arts, it will give you an overview of what you might want to do. But more importantly than that, go and watch classes, and go watch the white belt classes. Don't necessarily go and watch the blackbelt classes, because they know what they're doing, the instructors are going to be different than the ones who are teaching the white belts.

What you want to see is somebody who is genuinely caring, someone who is super positive. In our classes, we want to make sure that this is the happiest place they go. And when they come in, they want to be here. When they leave, they have a smile on their face, they feel good about themselves. You want teachers who are super complimentary, teachers who look like they want to be there. Make sure that the studio is clean. Go in their restroom. When you walk in the door, does it smell like a gym? Or does it look like a nice place you'd want to go and train or bring your family? So, some of those basic kinds of things, but I think it's really, super important to go and watch classes before you go.

Julie: Makes total sense. It sounds like what you're saying is, martial arts takes a lot of discipline, but the instructors don't need to be a hardass and mean about it. It has to be, "Yeah we're being disciplined but we are enjoying this too."

Cindy: Absolutely! The olden days, yeah, you would get screamed at and it would be ugly. In our system, you start off white, orange, gold, green, purple. By the time you hit blue or even brown, you'll hear people change from saying, "Oh I take martial arts," as if I'm taking a class, to saying, "I'm a martial artist." When you get to that point, you're a lifer. You kind of have flipped a switch and reframed how you view yourself and what it means in this discipline. That, for me, is really exciting when you see that. You can see that in a kid 10 years old.

Julie: Amazing. Is there a licensing entity for martial arts studios, or it's just, kind of, anybody wants to set one up they can set one up?

Cindy: It's a little of both. There is the World Taekwondo Federation that you have to be licensed if you're a true Taekwondo studio. For our association, we have a mandatory bootcamp that we go to every January and we have to get recertified in all the curriculums. So, all of the school owners are certified in the curriculum. We teach exactly the same thing if you come to an Ernie Reyes West Coast school in Texas, or in Ohio, or in Tennessee, or in Oregon, or in California. You're going to learn the exact same thing the exact same way.

Julie: Got it. So when you're looking for a place to go, make sure that they are certified and check out the lessons and see what you think.

Cindy: Definitely, because there are those, kind of, Karate-In-A-Box schools that, you know, somebody really liked martial arts and said, "I can do this on my own," and set up a school. You want to know, what's the lineage. Who's your Master instructor? Who's his or her Master instructor? How long have you been doing this? How long has your school been in place? How many blackbelts have you graduated? Do you have any other parents I can talk to? Again, watching those white belt classes to see how they treat those early students is super important.

Big thanks to Cindy for taking the time to chat with me. I'll post a link to her studio in the show notes, as well as resources for taking martial arts classes online, from home, if you're still in lockdown.

As a reminder, you can find the podcast on Instagram [@LoveWhatYouLovePod](#), and on Twitter, [@WhatYouLovePod](#). Come tell me how you learned what you're really capable of. Don't forget to use the hashtag [#LoveWhatYouLove](#) so we can continue the conversation.

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Thanks for listening. Let's hang out again soon.

Links:

[Ernie Reyes World Martial Arts Austin](#)

[Cindy Villanueva](#)

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