

# Barb Christensen, Breaking Barriers (and Boards) in Karate

How one of the first female black belts in Shimabukuro karate went on to lead her own club in Ann Arbor

**Interviewed by Bill Zirinsky**  
**Photos by Joni Strickfaden**

*Barb Christensen was the first woman in her karate school to reach black belt and one of the first women in the entire style to do so. She helped found the National Women's Martial Arts Federation and was one of the first women to run a local martial arts studio here in Ann Arbor. She is the head instructor at the Okinawan Karate Club of Ann Arbor and a 7<sup>th</sup>-degree black belt in Shorin Ryu karate. I sat down with her at her sunny and well cared for home on the west side of Ann Arbor, and she talked about her path to becoming a female karate instructor, the emphases of her karate program for kids, and the rewards of being a martial artist.*

**Bill Zirinsky:** Barb, where were you raised, and how long have you lived in the Ann Arbor area?

**Barb Christensen:** I grew up in the Toledo area and I have spent my adult life in Ann Arbor.

**Bill Zirinsky:** When did you begin in martial arts? And what drew you in, initially?

**Barb Christensen:** When I was a freshman in college, I took a self-defense course. After it ended, some of us began attending Tae Kwon Do classes with the instructor. The self-defense class wasn't real interesting, but I loved the athleticism of the martial arts classes. We were taught and pushed to do a lot of new things. That made it both interesting intellectually and challenging physically.

**Bill Zirinsky:** You practice Shorin Ryu karate, is that correct? Have you been doing that since the beginning and, if not, what caused you to change to that style of karate?

**Barb Christensen:** I started out in Tae Kwon Do, which is a Korean form with the same roots as karate. After a few years, I migrated to Shorin Ryu because I liked the completeness of the style. In addition to the empty hand aspects, the Shorin Ryu school also taught five weapons, which was unusual at the time.

**BZ:** When did you get your black belt? And what level are you at now?

**Barb:** I earned 1st-degree black belt in 1978 and I now hold the rank of 7th-degree black belt.

**BZ:** When you started, were there lots of girls and women in the martial arts? What was it like back then for females?

**Barb:** I was the first female at my *dojo* [school] to reach black belt and I believe the third in the entire style of Grandmaster Shimabukuro. There were not many women in the martial arts at all. But, the seventies were a very energetic and enthusiastic time for young women to try "men's" activities. We were pushing against all kinds of barriers in sports and in the work world. So young women were becoming interested in martial arts and were joining area clubs. That met with some interesting dynamics, as virtually all of the instructors and top students were male, and women wanted to take their place in the programs.



**Barb Christensen is the founder and long-time head instructor of the Okinawan Karate Club of Ann Arbor.**

**BZ:** Are there a lot of women now at the higher levels in karate, and what about years ago?

**Barb:** There were very few women black belts then. The martial arts in general were much younger here in the states and for women – we were just getting started. Now, there are many high-ranking women. In my style, one woman has a 9th-degree black belt, which is as high as anyone can go, other than the Grandmaster.

**BZ:** You were one of the founders of the National Women's Martial Arts Federation. What were its origins? How big was it originally, and how big is it today?

**Barb:** In the seventies and eighties, a lot of female martial artists were getting together for conferences and trainings in order to share expertise, support each other, and socialize. There were many very talented women who were training around the U.S. and in Canada, and we eventually created a formal organization that still exists today. There is a five-day training every summer that is attended by women from all over the U.S. and also from Canada and Europe. The trainings are smaller now, but the skill level of the instructors is very high and there is great camaraderie and exchange of ideas and training methods.

**BZ:** Where is Shorin Ryu based? Can you briefly tell us the story of its roots, and also trace its emigration to the U.S.?

**Barb:** Shorin Ryu is a popular style with three main branches, all coming from Okinawa, Japan. Our organization is headed by Grandmaster Eizo Shimabukuro, tenth *dan* [rank]. In general, Chinese fighting arts mixed with indigenous arts in Okinawa to create systems of karate. Shotokan is a very well-known Japanese style that came from Shorin Ryu, and Tae Kwon Do is



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a well-known Korean style that also came from Shorin Ryu. After World War II, there were a lot of military bases on Okinawa and Americans stationed there studied with local masters. When they returned to the U.S., some of them began teaching karate. Karate has spread and grown over the decades, with Americans continuing to travel to Okinawa and Japan for training, and Masters from there coming here.

**BZ:** Approximately how many Shorin Ryu martial arts clubs are there now in the U.S.?

**Barb:** I don't know. Way too many to count and many different branches.

**BZ:** And are they all associated with the same Grandmaster? If so, is it a close association, or more varied? Are others of the clubs led by women?

**Barb:** There are several Shorin Ryu Grandmasters and quite a few associations here of various sizes. Some schools are independent and others are closely associated with their roots. There are many schools and clubs that are headed by women, or headed by women in partnership with men.

**BZ:** Overall, can you describe the changes in the atmosphere for women in martial arts over these 35 years?

**Barb:** The changes are so drastic it is hard to describe. I would never have imagined the success that women have had in the martial arts. When I was training in the seventies, there was a fair amount of open hostility towards women. We were pushing for acceptance and respect and, as a result, many of us were booted out of the schools we attended. There was a serious glass ceiling and, in fact, Judo had a formal policy that women could only go as high as 5th degree, while men could go to 10th.

**BZ:** You said to me that, on a local level, you knew everybody here in town in the martial arts 25 years ago. Tell us about the "scene" then, and about the "scene" now?

**Barb:** Martial arts in the U.S. has grown tremendously and is now a very popular activity for children as well as adults. Previously, in Ann Arbor, many of the clubs were associated with the University on some level. At that time, anyone could use the U of M gyms. So there were formal student clubs as well as clubs for a combination of students and community members. We used to train at the Intramural Building and at the old Waterman Gym. Now most of the schools are commercial or clubs associated with the Y or Rec and Ed. Our club rents space and meets a few times a week. I know many of the long-time instructors here, but there are a lot that I don't know at all now. Ann Arbor is a popular place to locate a school.

**BZ:** You said to me that you're "very earthbound, very grounded" and that you want to talk about concrete things, that you're perhaps less inclined to talk about martial arts philosophy than instructors in other schools. Can you say more (or less) about that?

**Barb:** Well, activities lend themselves to personalities that mesh with their philosophy. I think there is a perception that martial arts people sit and meditate for hours and read people's minds. There are some people who emphasize that, but most of us are very ordinary people with ordinary families and lives. Karate has low stances and is grounded and stable. It also has a lot of sharp, staccato movements. We start on time and end on time and don't spend much time philosophizing about it. We just do it.

**"My class is not based on competition. There are many competitive sports available and I wanted a more inclusive atmosphere for kids..."**

**BZ:** Tell us about your program...how many kids and how many adults, what do you focus on, what are the strengths of your program?

**Barb:** At this point, I am the head instructor overall. But I handle the children's program and my student, Missy Siudara, handles the adult program. Some of the adults have children that joined and then the parents followed. Likewise, the adults have enrolled their children in the kids' classes and many of them help teach. We have about thirty kids from age four to 14. We focus on traditional karate technique and personal development in the area of leadership. The students who continue in the program receive instruction in teaching and leading classes and exercises. The school is small enough that everyone is my student and I teach all of the classes at this point.

**BZ:** I know that different martial arts studios have varying emphases: self-defense, character and self-esteem, competition, etc. Where does your studio fit on that continuum?

**Barb:** Everyone who teaches imparts some of their values through whatever they are teaching. For some kids, it is very hard to manage their behavior to be the kind of example to younger kids that we want them to be. For others, it is hard to get up in front and speak up and demonstrate with confidence. So along with physical karate technique, this is what I work with the students on. It is great for adults as well as kids. If you can teach a class, you can run a meeting. It is very useful training.

**BZ:** You told me you focus on "leadership." Please elaborate.

**Barb:** A few years ago, I started a program for intermediate/advanced students called the Black

Belt Club. It is a leadership group that I work with in teaching and leading exercises. I teach them about the history and tradition of karate and the nuts and bolts of teaching. They work on using a commanding voice, keeping a steady pace, and thinking on their feet. The kids lead warm-up exercises, model techniques, and help the lower-ranking students. They eventually work their way up to teaching a class on their own when they are black belts. In the high schools in Ann Arbor, there are many opportunities for leadership in the different after-school activities. This program helps prepare kids to be ready to take their place in high school, college, and the workplace.

**BZ:** When did you begin your program for Little Dragons?

**Barb:** We started Little Dragons about eight years ago. The idea is to give a separate environment for the under-seven-year-old group, as their needs are much different than the nine-, ten-, and 11-year-olds. It has been a wonderful and fun program and I have had several students who started in Little Dragons and stayed to earn their black belt.

**BZ:** You told me that in your program, every kid gets her/his turn, everybody wins...please explain.

**Barb:** Yes, my class is not based on competition. There are many competitive sports available and I wanted a more inclusive atmosphere for kids. I was a very good athlete, but I always enjoyed the practices more than the games. The stress of competing was a de-motivator for me. I love the athleticism and focus on improvement in the martial arts, and I try to create an environment where there are unlimited opportunities to expand, improve, and grow. Every student participates fully in the classes and advances through the belt system. Class attendance is the most important factor.

**BZ:** How long does it take to get a black belt in your program?

**Barb:** For an adult, four to five years. For a child, five or six years.

**BZ:** You said that karate has been called "moving zen." Why?

**Barb:** There is nothing like the feeling one has after a great practice. The mind is calm and happy, as well as the body.

**BZ:** Can you get kids to do "moving zen"? Kids are pretty active, aren't they?

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**Barb:** Yes, well that varies. We have fairly rowdy times and we have quiet and focused times. Of course, the older and more advanced students are better about this than the young ones. But, many parents are surprised by the focus the kids have in class.

**BZ:** How might parents best determine the right martial arts school for their child?

**Barb:** The best thing to do is go watch or even have their child participate in a class. See how comfortable it feels. The students have to enjoy it or they won't continue long enough to benefit. Some places are very structured, others more flexible. Some are competitive and attend tournaments. There is a lot of variety and many different arts and styles.



**“The seventies were a very energetic and enthusiastic time for young women to try “men’s” activities. We were pushing against all kinds of barriers in sports and in the work world.”**

**Barb:** Karate is very challenging intellectually and this is what attracts a lot of people. Many sports are focused on winning, so they only work on strategies that will help them win. But, we have a huge variety of material that we cover. There is a lot of memorization, and also a lot of patterns and sequencing. But, unlike [academic] school, everything we do is in the context of practice and perfecting and moving up — trying to get it right. Since the students want to earn the next belt, they are very willing to do the work. Physically, we practice a wide variety of motor skills, more than any sport I have ever seen. So, the brain is working to get the body to be able to perform the tasks stronger, faster, and more accurately. The physical is in the context of learning and memorizing exercises, so many brain functions are working at the same time. Schools seem to be standardizing and narrowing the kinds of learning they emphasize and there seems to be a lot of memorization taken out of context.

So, it is important to participate in activities that cover a broader range of kinds of learning.



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**BZ:** You said to me that karate is great for brain development. Please tell us about the ways that skills are built, and what martial arts activities in your program enhance overall development.

**BZ:** Do you have kids in your programs with learning issues or attention issues, and how does your program help them?

**Barb:** We have a whole range of students and our program helps all of them. There are about 30 students at any one time, and many of them stay for years, so the instructors know the kids pretty well. We focus on helping each student move forward. There is no one absolute standard that everyone has to meet. It is flexible.

**BZ:** As a woman martial arts instructor, you can be an important role model for girls. Can you speak to that?

**Barb:** Obviously, the world is wide open to both girls and boys today. There are unlimited opportunities for both. This is a generalization, but my observation is that around age eight or nine, boys become more outgoing and confident and girls start pulling back. I think that boys' culture is more hierarchical and focused on moving up and being better than someone else. Girls tend to work on perfecting their own skills but are not necessarily driven to beat someone else. For instance, in sparring, a boy may be trying to win, while a girl may be trying to survive. Also, boys tend to be willing to lead, even when they are not totally confident that they know what they are doing. Girls want to make sure they are doing things correctly before they will get up in front. So I try to be mindful of this and provide settings for girls to gain confidence in ways that they are comfortable. Today, parents want their girls to be prepared to take leadership positions just as much as their



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boys. I don't think it is as much role modeling as that atmosphere. The trick is to help all students meet challenges without feeling defeated. It is a hard balance to achieve. There are many boys who are also not confident. I never criticize or embarrass anyone who gets up in front. I simply thank them and give corrections at another time.

**BZ:** You mentioned to me that you "look out for your girls." And that karate is confrontational, that girls quit in environments where they're overpowered. Would you explain these issues for our readers, and also talk about "boy culture" versus "girl culture"?

**Barb:** I think it is cooler for a boy to know karate than it is for a girl. So there are more rewards [for boys], because being tough is a lot more important in boy culture than it is in girl culture. But, parents want their daughters to be very competent and confident, so they really want them in activities like martial arts. The challenge is to provide a great atmosphere for everyone. We practice everything from rolling and falling to board breaking and sparring. I talk about that and remind students that there will be parts that are easy and comfortable, and there will be parts that are difficult and make them feel incompetent. The variety is a big strength of Shorin Ryu. I have seen many females quit martial arts throughout the years because they feel beat up physically and emotionally. Sparring is always optional and sometimes the girls opt out and practice something else or they might want to just spar with other girls their size. This can also be true for boys. Mostly kids really challenge themselves and get out there and practice and improve.

**BZ:** You said to me that moms and dads want their girls to be able to have a combination of emotional and physical safety. Please elaborate.

**Barb:** Obviously physical safety is a huge concern for parents of girls. I do not teach "self defense" and it is not my focus. However, the principles of karate are self-protection. Surprisingly, awareness, eye contact, and confidence can be more important than how hard someone can hit.

**BZ:** You have two daughters. What ages are they and what are they into? Did they study martial arts and, if so, did they like it?

**Barb:** I have two daughters, both in high school. They both trained in my class and earned black belts. They are very busy with school and sports activities, so they don't participate regularly in the club at this point. Do they like karate? Good question. I think they had a lot of fun and enjoyed it, but at the same time it was the obligatory "piano lessons" of our household.

**BZ:** You said that it's hard to keep a martial arts school alive without another job or other work. What is your background outside of the martial arts, and what have been your other occupations?

**Barb:** It is possible to make a living teaching martial arts today, because of the popularity with children. But, I never wanted my hobby to be my job. It is a labor of love for me and if I had to bring in students to pay the rent, I always thought the enjoyment would be gone. I am trained as an electrician and I worked in that trade in construction and in management at the U of M for many years. At this point, I am self-employed as a rental property owner and manager.

**BZ:** Over these many years of being into the martial arts, what's been most challenging about it for you? And what have you liked least about it, as a martial artist, and as a teacher of the martial arts?

**Barb:** The hard part is to balance teaching and learning. There is a saying that when you teach, you become a very good green belt. That means that we keep teaching the same basic material over and over and have little time to get our own training or to develop the advanced material. I have had the good fortune of always having students who are there to learn from me. Who can say no when there are 20 kids lining up and staring at you? It is very inspiring and energizing. I love teaching kids. It doesn't seem like work. I am always thinking about the next class, the next test, the next activity to introduce. I don't have the constraints of school; everyone is there because they want to be, and I have a great group of adult assistants. So there is not much that I don't like.

**BZ:** What have you most loved about being a karate practitioner, and what have you loved most about being a karate instructor?

**Barb:** What I like about the martial arts is the unlimitedness of it. There is always more to learn, more people to train with, more ways to practice. It is a wide-open sport.

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*Classes for adults and children at the Okinawan Karate Club of Ann Arbor are held at the Dakota Building at 1785 W. Stadium, inside the Mind, Body, Spirit Academy. Barb Christensen may be contacted at [SenseiBarb@KarateAnnArbor.com](mailto:SenseiBarb@KarateAnnArbor.com) or 734-678-3882.*

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