

My business Samurai Institute started with a vision as most do. My vision since 1974 was to create a space where people could come and explore the world of Aikido and other martial arts safely and without getting beat-up. Where emphasis was placed on personal development rather than a sport or competition. But this vision needed funds if we were to ever really get going. Here's my story.

On March 1st, 2021, I was driving to Hickory from my home in Taylorsville and drove by a building in Bethlehem and noticed a building for rent. I thought to myself, that would make a nice little dojo. I called about it and it wasn't a good fit for me, so I was still thinking and started looking for locations in Hickory. I came across several and actually looked at the original building I started teaching at. But all were not a good fit because of funding. I was starting this with little to no capital and was looking for cheap, so I turned to Recreation Centers in Catawba County and the YMCAs. Newton Rec Center offered us a wonderful location in their basement with a private entrance and plenty of parking. COVID shut those doors 2 days before we were scheduled to open.

I did not give up because I knew God had a purpose for me and I was sure this would work, so off I went to Hickory and the Rec Dept there. They had one location in a room with little room for growth. So, again I looked and happened to call Shaun Bryant, the owner of Foothills Gymnastics and he offered us the After-school room in the back, and we were in business, finally. Opened March 19th, 2022, with around 50 people showing up for our opening demo and trial class. We signed up around 12 that day and we begin. But there were some issues. First was we only had 3-fold up mats and that was not enough. Mats for martial arts are specific and expensive. We didn't have the capital to invest in the mats ourselves and that's when my daughter told me about the Microenterprise grant from the City of Hickory, and how it helped small businesses with start-up cost, equipment, etc. I was hopeful.

I contacted Karen Dickerson at City Hall, and she explained the process and I immediately filled out the application and submitted it. Again, I was hopeful. During the process and in between the meeting for the grant, I was able to secure a new location and found a warehouse in Mooresville that sold mats like I needed, and I was able to purchase the mats and some other equipment for our classes. If it wasn't for the Microenterprise Grant program, I would not have been able to purchase the state-of-the-art mats we now have!

Since our humble beginnings, we now have hired our enrollment coordinator, Sage Fields and our facility coordinator, Keyleigh Huffman. We now have 42 students, and we are teaching 25 classes per week ranging in age from walking to adults. It was truly through the efforts of our community and the City of Hickory who have supported our business since the beginning that we are able to thrive and grow in ways we never dreamed possible.