As I started to fall towards the concrete, my jaw dropped, my eyes widened, and my mind began to race. I was several feet off the ground, and hurtling through the warm Sedona air. Why? I had been establishing myself as the acrobat of a new group of friends. But time slowed to a halt as I realized, mid-air, that the flight of twelve steps I’d chosen to jump was too high: I was in for a rough landing.

While debating how best to land safely, I thought of an encounter I had at a New Year’s Eve party. Some of my more prideful classmates got in the faces of two guys who had come from the town over to pick up their girlfriends. Quicker than even I expected, these two kids were fighting off six or seven from my school. I didn’t join in; my only objective was to minimize the situation. So I pulled an acquaintance of mine off of his victim, which infuriated him. I dodged his first punch, but if I hadn’t, I’d have been looking at a broken jaw. Growing up, I was the only Indian kid in town, so I faced a fair bit of exclusion—and some poorly-crafted yet well-received insults. Rather than lashing out, I spent thirteen years studying Kenpo Karate, which taught me to hone my self-control and self-discipline. So I didn’t retaliate; I told him we weren’t going to fight for no reason and to go calm down inside. I had diffused the situation verbally before it could intensify to a point necessitating self-defense. I had used good Kenpo.

Back in Sedona, I was falling into uncertainty, just like when I decided to move from Bellmore, NY, my hometown of 17 years, to Greenwich, CT two days before the start of senior year. Even though my family was moving at summer’s end, I was given the unique opportunity to stay behind to finish my senior year of high school; however, I conceded that it wouldn’t be right to leave my family a year earlier than college would have required me to. I wanted my parents to move into their new home happily and to be there for my twin brother and sister, who were starting 8th grade in a new school. It wasn’t ideal, but I was excited to make new friends and become part of my new community. If I can make the most of this last year of high school not knowing anybody, I can do the same in college.

I looked down at the shrinking gap between my feet and the concrete, wondering if I could do anything to lessen the pain of landing. I had already developed chondromalacia (read: bruising under kneecaps) from doing squats improperly in Karate. On days we warmed up with squats, my instructor would stress the importance of proper form in preventing lasting knee injuries. And every time, I thought to myself, “Well it’s a good thing I’m doing them right…” I wasn’t. After two years of going to the gym, I finally realized I was working out incorrectly. While explaining my injury to my dad, he reminded me that he remains injury free at 51, citing his teenage pushup routine. As I barreled towards the street, I learned that I would need to be more careful with my body if I am to remain active throughout my adult life.

I pummeled my heel into the ground, but luckily, after walking around, I realized it was just a bruise. I spent the rest of the night sitting around a campfire with my new friends, laughing about my “legendary” jump. We talked about our future aspirations, the adventures we hoped to have, and how we all planned to have unique impacts on the world.