

## **Together on the tatami, together in life: How Judo became a path of healing, bonding, and empowerment for Ms. Ana Sajko and her daughter**

In JOY Talks Interview #4, we step into a deeply personal story from Slovenia, the story of **Ms. Ana Sajko** and her six-year-old **daughter Neja**, who shares her mother's love for judo, from [Judo Club Golovec](#). Ana first walked into the dojo during one of the most difficult chapters of her life. As a survivor of domestic violence, she was searching not only for strength, but for a way to feel safe again – in her body, in her mind, and in the world around her. Through the club's ***Judo for Women programme***, Ana slowly began to rebuild her confidence and reclaim her sense of self. But the real transformation began when she invited her daughter Neja to join her. What began as a solitary journey of healing grew into something much greater – a shared experience of trust, joy, and quiet strength. Their story is more than just a tale about sport. It's a reminder that judo is not only about throws and discipline – it can be a space of belonging, recovery, and the kind of bond that words alone cannot create.

### **How did your judo journey begin, and how did you experience it together as mother and daughter?**

Ana:

I started judo through the *Judo for Women* programme at our club, created for women like me who had experienced domestic violence or had fewer opportunities. I came with fear and uncertainty, unsure if I even belonged. But already in the first session, I felt something shift. My body moved with strength again, not tension. When I later brought Neja to practice, something truly magical happened. It was as if we found a common language we hadn't spoken before. Judo became our safe space.

### **What does it mean for you to train together as a family?**

Ana:

It's our special time. A piece of the week that no one can take away from us. Sometimes, across the tatami, we just look at each other, and we know. No words needed. In those moments, I'm not just someone healing from trauma. I'm a mother, building a future.

Neja:

I like training with my mom. She shows me some techniques, and sometimes I teach her something too! (laughs) The best part is when we hug after practice. I love that we both enjoy judo, and that my mom helps me and corrects me, and we do it together.

### **Your story is also one of transformation. How has judo helped you face past trauma or feelings of powerlessness?**

Ana:

It's hard to put into words what it feels like to trust again. First your own body, and then other people. Judo gave me a sense of control over myself, not through force,

but through respect, discipline, and softness. Neja felt everything, even when I didn't say a word. With judo, we both began to release tension. I feel like we're slowly healing – together.

**What message would you like to share with other families or individuals who might be going through difficult times?**

Ana:

Even when it feels like there's no way out, there *are* places, like this judo club, where you can finally breathe again. Judo isn't just a sport. It's a way back to yourself. And when you bring your child with you, it becomes even more. It becomes a healing path for the whole family. To anyone out there who is struggling: ***Don't worry about getting it perfect. Just take the first step and keep moving forward.***

**Neja, why do you love judo? What's your favorite part of training?**

Neja:

Because we jump and roll around! And because my mom trains with me. I even did a real throw once, and everyone clapped! I like our judo coach the most. He's the best! We play a lot of games and do gymnastics too. It's really fun.

**How do you feel when you're with your mom at the club? Is there something special you like doing together?**

Neja:

I feel good. Actually, I feel *rainbow-good!* (laughs) Sometimes we're on the tatami together, and sometimes I train with the other kids. I like it when we train in pair, and at the end of training, my mom always spins me around. After judo class, we go for tea or ice cream. It's our little tradition.

**If you had to explain judo to a friend who's never tried it, what would you say?**

Neja:

It's fun, and it teaches you how to fall without getting hurt. I have a friend, Alexis, who's blind, and he trains with me. He's not special, just different, and he trains a bit differently too. Judo is a martial art, but we also play and do gymnastics. And yes, we fight a little bit too!

Interview conducted by  
Ms. Špela Lampe Cakići (Judo Club Golovec)