

## Featured Dojo-cho, August 2007



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I started training in aikido when I was 18 years old. Thanks to aikido, I was able to find a place where there was no more past and no more future. I could just live in the moment. I grew up in an often violent atmosphere and I had built up a lot of anger inside of myself. I was a real party and rumble kind of guy and was definitely headed down a destructive path. If it hadn't been for aikido, I don't know where I would have ended up.

My training began at the Montreal Aikikai. Whenever I would step onto the mat all my problems and worries would vanish. I attended many of the classes there and was determined to learn to defend myself and kick some butt.

I must of been a real pain for the more experienced dojo students because I really needed to feel like the stuff was effective. Let's just say I wasn't taking ukemi and was determined to prove everybody wrong.

Soon after I began training, Christian Tissier Sensei came into town to give a demonstration and seminar. Watching him, I was convinced of the effectiveness of aikido. I saw something I liked and was inspired to train even harder.

Knowing there was no better place for me than in the dojo, I started looking for an uchideshi program. I needed to live in a dojo and I also wanted to leave Montreal and go experience life somewhere else, so I picked up a copy of the dojo directory in the Aikido Today Magazine and sent out letters all over the world looking for someone to take me in. Many people answered with wishes of luck - but no uchideshi program.

Finally, one ad I saw that offered an uchideshi program was for Sunset Cliff's Aikido in San Diego. The ad read, "Iwama ryu training located a half a block from the beach." I decided to go and check it out. I figured if it did not work out, I could just wander around in Mexico.

When I got to Sunset Cliff's Aikido, I was greeted by a very nice group of people and ended up joining the dojo.

Bernice Tom Sensei became my second aikido teacher. Not knowing anything about style and organizations I felt very lucky to have ended up in Bernice Sensei's dojo. There, I was taught a very clear basic approach to aikido and weapons training. Many other people like myself were there to devote themselves to aikido training. Many beautiful friendships came out of the time I spent there.

Once a year, at the Sunset Cliff's Aikido dojo, Frank Doran Sensei would come and give a seminar and expose us to his wonderful and clear teaching approach. I always enjoyed training in a more 'ki no nagare' fashion and loved Doran Sensei's teaching style. It became obvious to me that I needed him to be my next teacher. So, after spending about 7 years (on and off) living in Bernice Sensei's dojo, I asked Doran Sensei if he would take me to be his uchideshi.

I remember that night so well. It was during a pot luck dinner during a seminar when I got a chance to ask Sensei if I could come up to Redwood City. His answer was no! I was so disappointed. Sensei told me that his dojo was not set up to have a live-in student, but that I was always welcome to visit. I was not looking for comfort; I just wanted a chance to be his student.

One day I got an email from Sensei that said a position was open for a live-in student, and that I could come up to try it out for a month and see if I fit the job description. That brings me to

***My Most Memorable Aikido Experience.*** After a couple weeks living in the dojo, Sensei came up to me after class, grabbed me by the hair and pulled me up. He called out to the other students milling around after class, "Anyone else want to be uchideshi?" Then he dragged me into the dojo office and asked me to get in right hanmi. He shook my hand and said I was welcome to stay and be part of his dojo. I will never forget that moment. I spent 3 years or so living in the dojo and was given the opportunity to come into my own as far as my aikido goes. The trust and freedom Doran Sensei showed me allowed me to believe in myself and others again.

Sensei's teaching approach was to respect the 3 main principles of Aikido: aiki, kuzushi, shisei. I got to study that every night in a dojo full of wonderful experienced people. After some time, I was given a chance to start teaching by covering a class when Sensei was out of town. It was good for my confidence to have a Shihan give me the responsibility to teach. Soon I found out how much fun that was. Being given a chance to have my own

class and being promoted to san dan by Doran Sensei made me feel like I was graduating from Harvard. It gave me the confidence I needed to move back to Montreal to start my own dojo.

It's been a little over 6 months now and my dojo is growing. I see people bounce around, smile and have fun. I still feel like a total beginner. I guess the more you study the more you realize you don't know anything (10 years ago I knew everything.) I really appreciate the chance to see new people experience the beauty of aikido for the first time. I try to set up an atmosphere of cooperation so that the more subtle things inside the techniques can be studied. I have been influenced by many great teachers and was able to grab on and feel what it is that they are working on so I try to teach the gift of ukemi to my students so that one day they might also have the privilege to grab onto the many great aikidoka out there.

Over the last 12 years, I have come across lots of people and feel very grateful to have met so many wonderful people and shared knowledge and friendship with them. This is only the beginning; aikido has probably saved my life and has helped me to have a positive feeling about myself. If I can inspire one person in the same fashion, then I will be very happy.