

Featured Dojo-cho, October 2002



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Division 2

I began Aikido in 1982 - for many reasons - but mostly by chance. I was working as a massage practitioner in Florida when, on somewhat of a whim, I stopped by an Aikido class. The instructor, Richard Wagener Sensei, introduced himself and graciously invited me onto the mat. I was horrified, as I'd come in the 'clear' role of observer, and was entirely unprepared to take any risks beyond watching! I still remember back-peddling toward the exit, "Oh, no, as you can see, I'm wearing a silk blouse....couldn't possibly do this tonight....blah blah blah...." Well, I did end up on the mat, and I trained with Wagener Sensei for my remaining months in Florida.

After that I traveled around a lot and got to experience a number of styles and instructors, but I consider George Leonard Sensei, Danielle Evans Smith Sensei and Steve Davalos Sensei my most influential teachers during those years. I fell in love with the philosophy behind Aikido.

It was in the Aikido of Monterey dojo that I met Tom Elliott, with whom I later co-founded Aikido of San Luis Obispo. It's hard to pinpoint an exact 'founding' date, but I believe it was around 1987 or '88. We were teaching the Model Mugging Self Defense Program in a Kenpo studio, and somewhere along the way we had a little Aikido

class that turned into a bigger class - and so on. During this evolution we received generous support and guidance from Danielle Evans Smith Sensei, who sponsored us for a number of years. Eventually we became a club under Frank Doran Shihan, who remains to this day my primary teacher.

In 1991 students and friends from Model Mugging and Aikido worked together to convert an old Harley Davidson shop into a new 2,600 square foot training center and dojo. Aikido of San Luis Obispo has been in this location for eleven years now. Our membership these days ranges between 75 and 100 students (ages four through adult) depending on the season. It was during the 1990's that Michael Friedl Sensei also came to be a highly influential teacher and dear friend to me and to our dojo. I can't talk about the history of Aikido of SLO without acknowledging those who helped it weather the storms before its sails were up: Friedl Sensei, Evans Smith Sensei, and Doran Sensei. From each I've learned so much about leadership and the spirit of community support.

My most Memorable Aikido Experience

I think my most memorable Aikido experience occurred OFF the mat. It took place while I was back-peddling toward the exit (after Wagener Sensei invited me to join the Aikido class that first day.) I was absolutely positive I would NOT step on that mat - and that once I got out that door I wouldn't be returning! I will never forget the intense energy I felt then and there - almost a life or death kind of feeling. The exact details of how I ended up on the mat have always escaped me, but looking back I'm still in awe that the choice made in those next few moments so powerfully and completely determined the direction of the rest of my life.