

Featured Teacher, September 2020



Aimen Al-Refai

Aikido of Santa Cruz, Santa Cruz, California

I was introduced to Aikido at university in 1988, in Missouri, with Doris Evan Sensei under the direction of Akira Tohei Shihan of the Aikikai Midwest division. I graduated with a graphic arts degree and moved to California and spent the next five years at Musubi Dojo in southern California, studying intensively under Susan Perry and Ron Rubin Senseis. At Musubi Dojo, I learned how to teach Aikido, in particular to young people, and how to run and build a dojo. During my time at Musubi Dojo, I also worked with Ron and Susan on Aikido Today Magazine. In this capacity I attended multiple seminars and summer retreats of various branches of Aikido (Ki Society, Tomiki-ryu Aikido, Yoshinkan, Aikido Schools of Ueshiba, Aikikai, and others) to promote community and collaboration between the groups. Through these exposures, I made many connections with Senior Instructors, Dojo Chos, and Shihan around the world.

In 1994, I moved to Santa Cruz, CA and continued my training at Aikido of Santa Cruz (ASC), under Linda Holiday Sensei and Glen Kimoto Sensei. In addition, I attend local and regional seminars and Summer Retreats, practicing under many high-level instructors: Motomichi Anno, Mitsugi Saotome, Frank Doran, Robert Frager, Hiroshi Ikeda, Mary Heiny, Michael Friedl, Danielle Smith, Tom Read, and others too numerous to list. I have also traveled to Japan to train in Shingu and at the Aikikai Hombu Dojo. I practiced extensively under Anno Shihan from 1999-

2017. I have served as the Assistant Chief Instructor of ASC, coordinating many programs and supporting chief instructor Linda Holiday. Since 1995, I have been the chief instructor of our Aikido for Teens program. My teaching style utilizes an engaging, humorous style of teaching, complemented by a serious focus and 'presence', which draws young people and adults in and leads them along the path of Aikido.

Professionally off-the-mat, I am a full stack web developer (aka programmer) for the County of Santa Cruz. There I combine my graphic arts degree, 7 years as a massage therapist, MS in Robotics and Controls, and programming into a primordial soup of aiki to navigate the subtleties of government. I often find my deepest training happens at home my daughter and my life partner.

My Most Memorable Aikido Experiences

I have had many memorable moments on the mat and find it is hard to choose just one, but the moment that comes to mind is the one that started the whole aikido path:

I have been interested in and training in martial arts since I was 5 years old. The training was spotty and full of interruptions for sports and life. I started in Judo, then Karate, and then TKD. I started to become disillusioned with the fighting. "There had to be a better way to be martially effective and not fight" I thought to myself. The answer showed up on a kiosk: "Come see Aikido Demo today at the wrestling room." The name Aikido struck a bell and triggered a vague memory of a book I read but could not remember. So, I went to the wrestling room at the appointed time and found I was the only one there except for this 5 foot nothing impressive woman in an interesting uniform. "Hello, I am Doris Evans" she said in German accented English. We exchanged pleasantries until the allotted polite wait time for people to show up for a demonstration past.

"Well, it seems it is you and me. Have you ever experienced martial arts?" she asked

"Yes, I have trained in Judo, Karate and TKD." I said arrogantly

"Great! Give me your best punch and don't hold back." She said smiling

I gave her my dubious face and asked "Are you SURE!? I will hit you hard."

Her eyes hardened a little at my early 20 some arrogant ego and said: "Give it your best, *kid.*"

With one word she already had my center. My fist was flying fast enough for a hummingbird to take pause. Then everything slowed down and was vignettted by my eye blinks.

Blink... I feel great discomfort in my right wrist. Why is it turn out that way?

Blink... I see my feet off the ground and pointing to the ceiling.

Blink... I feel impact on the mat. I'm face down!? FACE DOWN!? And why is my arm straight and I am pinned?!

Back to real time, I hear sincerely laughing joy. "What's so funny!" I asked partially muffled by the mat as the pin is maintained.

"WELL, *kotegashi* hasn't work that well before!"

At that moment, I was truly and deeply hooked by Aikido. It is 30 + years later and with deep bow of gratitude to my first and subsequent teachers.

"*Domo arigatou gozaimashita!*" I cannot thank you enough for training this person into a better human being.