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Division 2

I was first introduced to Aikido around 1996, when I was driving home from soccer training. I had just finished wrapping up my plans for retiring from the senior leagues and I was getting old in my young age for a soccer player. I was trying to talk myself out of starting a Master's and PhD degree in film history and go skiing instead. I drove past a sign that said, "Aikido, Self Defense and Fitness." An existential thought told me to go and look inside. I had never seen a dojo in person before and had no idea what to expect. The sign on the glass doors said "Utah Aikikai." When I walked in, I was instantly struck by how elegant and simple the place was: stark white, natural wood, and Kanji. The place was quiet, except for the sound of soft impacts of smiling people and the occasional swoosh of a hakama flying through the air. As I stood there and watched the graceful movements, I instantly felt the honesty in this art. I was approached by a tall chiseled man with a broad smile and long ponytail who introduced himself as Hugh Young. I had a thousand questions for him and he told me, "you get one." I was hooked.

From then on, I stayed at Utah Aikikai and trained as a loyal, dedicated student. It was during my first years of training that I got exposed to many teachers I would still consider my most influential teachers today: Frank Doran Shihan, Cyndy Hayashi Shihan, Michael Friedl Shihan, and Kayla Feder Sensei. They were probably the first to go into my tool box. During my later studies, I discovered Yoshiaki Yokota Shihan from Hombu dojo and James Nakayama Sensei. I have also discovered other teachers of Budo, which is outside the realm of Aikido; Professor Eddie Edmunds of the Brazilian Jiu Jitsu world is top on my list.

When Utah Aikikai closed its doors in 2015, a group of my peers and I gathered to form a new place of training. A place where a Board of Trustees would govern the school and many teachers would share their Aikido ideas and techniques with the martial community of Utah. We formed Aikido Mountain West as a nonprofit dojo. It serves as a Budokan for the Japanese cultural arts and caters to all styles of Aikido that comes our way. Our intention is for our dojo to be a place where all other Aikidoka can come together and train for seminars, celebrations, and just for fun.

My most memorable Aikido experience.

I have had a lot of fine encounters during my Budo journey with situations violent and not so violent where Aikido has served me nicely and has given me some excellent lessons to remember. The one that is on the top of my list now, is during the creation of Aikido Mountain West. The idea of dojo that welcomes all ideas and training was easier said than done! In the past, the Aikido community here in the greater Salt Lake City area and Utah went through a period of isolation with other schools and dojos. Nobody was visiting other dojos or their seminars because of various reasons; life situations, political choices and such. This led to a breakdown of understanding and communication within the Aikido community. In order to come together and make our intentions work, we had to actually talk to one another. I remember having lunch personally with each of the Dojo Chos of the other schools and coming up with a program that invites and establishes a dialogue of mutual training and ideas from each of these fine instructors. The challenge at hand was learning to really listen to what the other teachers were saying and then make it happen. We found common ground! And away we go! Gambatte Kudasai! Indeed!