

Featured Senior Instructor, June 2019



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Division 2

I began studying aikido at the age of 14 in France. This was the minimum age to begin training in France at the time and I had been eagerly awaiting my 14th birthday. So, the day I turned 14, I joined the local dojo. My initial sensei was Fernand Simon, who was a student of Noro Sensei and Nakazono Sensei. Christian Tissier had recently come back from Japan and was leading our division. As a result, he offered many seminars and I had a lot of exposure to his Aikido. During these early years, I was able to train throughout Europe and appreciated having the opportunity to experience different dojos. I trained in France until leaving for the US at the age of 22. At the time I left, I was ranked as a Nidan, having tested under the Tissier-led Board of the FFAAA.

I moved from France to New York City in 1987 and started training with Yamada Sensei at NY Aikikai. During that time, Donovan Waite was Yamada Sensei's Uchi Deshi and I had the privilege of occasionally being Donovan's uke as he traveled throughout the Tri-State area doing demos. This was a really exciting time for me as a newcomer to the US.

In 1989, I moved to Berkeley, California and began training with Shibata Sensei. I decided to take a break from Aikido in 1991 and pursued training in other martial arts over the years.

After settling in the Monterey area, I learned of the Aikido of Monterey dojo. I drove by the dojo a number of times before I finally decided, in 2003, it was time to step back on the Aikido mat. I did so as a white belt. What struck me immediately was that the dojo was nothing like anything I had experienced before. Sensei Danielle Smith and Sensei Dennis Evans were extremely welcoming – as were all of the students. This was in direct contrast to some of my other training experiences. I felt immediately as if I were part of the Aikido of Monterey family. After a few weeks of training, I think it had become apparent that I had trained in Aikido before and, one night, Sensei Dennis walked up to me on the mat and handed me a black belt. “Put this on,” he said. I’ve been training at Aikido of Monterey ever since and proudly earned my Sandan, Yondan, and Godan ranks with their expert guidance and under the watchful eye of Doran Sensei.

I have also continued to enjoy learning more about other martial arts and traveling to other dojos to experience different styles of Aikido. One martial art that particularly attracted me was Krav Maga, and I ultimately became an instructor in the art. While some may find Krav Maga to be quite distinct (even the opposite, perhaps) of Aikido, I saw many similarities in the two practices. I am also a firm believer that you need to know what your martial choices are in order to choose the peaceful resolution. Nothing has made this clearer to me than training in these two arts.

I’ve learned from every teacher (and every student) that I’ve trained with, but, of course, a few have been particularly important in my formation. From Christian Tissier Sensei, I’ve learned much about precision of movement. From Danielle Smith Sensei, I’ve learned about jiu waza and flow, unlike what I had ever experienced before. From Dennis Evans Sensei, I’ve experienced both the martial components of aikido and the underlying non-physical aspects of aikido principles. Frank Doran Sensei illustrated for me that both the martial and the flow/gentleness of aikido can coexist.

My Most Memorable Aikido Experience

My most memorable Aikido experience, interestingly, happened at a Krav Maga instructor seminar. There were 12 of us and we had been training intensively for a week. Our days started at 7 am and typically ended around 8 or 9 at night. On the last night, we headed out to dinner as a full group...a table of 12 entering a restaurant at 9:30 pm...not a server’s dream. And our server was NOT happy about this. She was surly and treating us pretty badly. Our conversation, in addition to complaining about the poor service we were getting, centered around our shared experiences in various martial arts. I was the lone Aikido practitioner in the crowd and, as sometimes happens among martial artists, there was some skepticism voiced around the table about the effectiveness of aikido: “I just don’t GET it,” one guy said. “Ok,” I responded, “let me show you what Aikido is.” The server was approaching our table again, I said to her “Listen, I get where you’re coming from here. It’s late. You’ve probably had a really

long day, and the last thing you really need right now is a big table. If there's anything we can do to make it easier to deal with all 12 of us, let us know. We're happy to help." She said "Yeah, it's been a long day. I'm just exhausted." And we got our first smile of the evening...and a glimpse of an attentive and friendly server (who remained such for the rest of the dinner). As she walked away, I looked at the guys and said "That's what Aikido is." I saw several thoughtful nods, heard a "wow" or two, and, sure, a couple guys still looked confused. But, yes, THAT's what Aikido is!