

Family karate school years in the making

By Michele Lawson

“Never again!”

The 13-year-old face staring back from the mirror was covered in blood. His swollen features were marred with bruises. The pain from the broken bones in his nose echoed in his fractured ribs.

“I looked into the mirror and said to myself that I was never going to let this happen to me again,” recalls Philip Allain, who set off that day on a 30-year journey into martial arts and law enforcement.

Today he owns and operates Blue Dragon Martial Arts, which provides karate and self-defense skills at two locations in Oro-Medonte Township.

In 1974, however, enrolling in a local karate club wasn't an option for that teenage boy who had taken a short cut through his new high school on the way home from an evening school fundraiser.

The two grade 13 boys he encountered outside an empty shop class were sharing a drug high and the misguided notion that there was entertainment value in throwing a much younger boy headfirst into a locker. Only the yells of a school janitor halted the severe beating that followed.

The next morning, after ripping his bloodied face from the pillow it was stuck to, his anger and resolve grew with every step toward that bathroom mirror.

“That's when I encountered my first dilemma,” Allain said. “Okay, I was never going to let it happen again, but what was I going to do about it? I had no way to defend myself.

“Martial arts was not mainstream then. There were no boxing clubs, and wrestling wasn't taught in school. I went to the library to find out about self-defense. I found a martial arts book from London – and tried to teach myself.

“It didn't work.”

He kept looking for an answer to his problem and immediately signed up when a local brown belt offered a series of classes in the basement of the nearby church. But the course was soon discontinued due to lack of interest.

Deciding to go to the source, he tracked down the brown belt's teacher Israel Segarra, the only martial arts teacher in the region.

Working part-time as a truck stop bus-boy throughout high school to pay for the lessons, Allain followed *Sensei* (which means guide or teacher) Israel five nights a week to the different class locations across northern Ontario. Sometimes, the determined teenager would ride his bike up to two hours each way to attend a class.

“I'd come home so exhausted I couldn't see straight, but I got my class in.”

Segarra remembers.

“He used to follow me all over the place,” Segarra recalls. “In Espanola, a couple of locations on Manitoulin Island, Birch Island, Whitefish Falls... wherever I taught, he'd be there.”

Allain had always been involved in sports, participating in hockey, baseball, cross-country running and competitive swimming in elementary school, and continuing with running and swimming for a while in high school.

But about halfway through high school, he began focussing on his karate training.

“It was still not popular, and I was laughed at,” he remembers. “Certainly not being part of football or hockey got me unwanted attention regularly.”

But he’d found his passion.

Karate classes in the ‘70s were “rough and tumble and comprised mainly of fighting with each other.” Over the next couple of years, the injuries he sustained included broken fingers, toes, ribs and nose, as well as numerous cuts from practicing with actual knives.

Sensei Segarra, who Allain calls “an accomplished street fighter and yoga teacher,” believed in “reality training”. In addition to the brutal in-class training, Segarra took his students outside to drill in the company of black flies and snowdrifts.

“I was raised in New York City,” recounts Segarra. “That’s where I started my martial arts training. It wasn’t a fad back then – I wanted to survive. That was the atmosphere Philip trained in. There were a lot of drop-outs.”

Throughout high school, training and work continued side-by-side.

Summers were spent exploring various trades at the local paper mill where his father and, in fact, most of the residents of the northern Ontario town of Espanola worked. In grade 11, he became a member of the union and began learning the skills of pipefitters, electricians, carpenters and welders.

Eventually, he worked up to tending the paper machines themselves. But despite the impressive pay-cheques he received, he was also taking home the realization that the paper mill wasn’t in his long-range career plans.

“Working at the paper mill made me realize I didn’t want to be a manual laborer for the rest of my life. I knew that becoming a police officer was my way out,” he recalls. “I was lucky enough to be taken under the wing of the local police chief and became a civilian member of the local police department.

“I worked as the night dispatcher and front-desk person while I was working my way through community college in Sudbury.”

He traveled back and forth to between work and his studies in the French-language Law and Securities program at Cambrian College even after moving to Sudbury. He continued to commute to his job in Espanola until being taken on by a police service in the Barrie area.

His karate education had continued as well.

While living in Sudbury, he joined all three karate schools in town to maximize training opportunities. Not even a motorcycle accident, which resulted in a life-threatening injury and massive damage to his leg, interrupted his drive to train and learn.

He recalls sitting in his hospital bed, immobilized from the waist down, getting in his upper-body conditioning. He grins when he recounts the doctor’s grim pronouncement that the young man would never do karate again, and that he would never become a police officer. Allain simply didn’t believe it.

“I smiled and nodded ‘okay’ and kept training in bed from the waist up.”

The January before he was set to graduate from college, Allain was restless and ready to go to work. Using his resources at the Espanola Police Department, he applied to every police service in Ontario. Within three month, he was hired by Joint Forces Operations to work as a deep cover operative for a year.

“Then I switched to plain clothes CID (Criminal Investigations Division) and then to uniformed duties,” he says.

Prior to his 14 uniformed years in the Innisfil area, he attended the Ontario Police College in the southwestern Ontario town of Aylmer. It was there he made the contacts that would allow his karate to go to the next level.

“All my training was Canadian until I got on regular shift as a uniformed officer,” Allain says. “That’s when I started training in the U.S. to receive advance training. In the beginning, I traveled every four days from Innisfil to Grand Rapids, Michigan, to train with one of the top American karate instructors, and his students.”

After about a year of weekly trips, he slowed the pace somewhat. The next two years had him making the 14-hour trip to Sensei Ernest Estrada’s *dojo* only about once a month.

The period that followed had him focussing more on his police career than his martial arts, although he did maintain a solo training routine.

But karate was not to be kept on the back-burner for long.

In 1989, Allain embraced the opportunity to travel to Okinawa, a Japanese island off the coast of China, and the birthplace of karate.

It was also the location of Meitoku Yagi’s *dojo*.

Sensei Yagi, upon whose life the character Mr. Miyagi of *The Karate Kid* movies was loosely based, was deemed a living treasure by the Japanese government – an honor reserved for those considered masters in their art.

“There is nobody better than the gentleman I met in Okinawa,” acknowledges Allain respectfully.

At the Yagi *dojo*, Allain and his colleague trained three times a day, every day, for a month in the scorching heat.

“I always wanted to be the best I could be at this stuff, and that’s why I went to Okinawa to study with the top people.”

He also felt compelled to share what he was learning. He wanted to give others the tools he felt were necessary for self-protection, as well as passing on the other intrinsic lessons of martial arts. “Things like self discipline and focus.”

This desire eventually led him to leave the police services and concentrate on running his own *dojo* full time.

“I continued to travel and to train with some of the top self-defense instructors in the world – the Americans, the Israelis, the British,” he recounts. “But I was still uneasy about what I was teaching.

“My clients were just normal people who wanted to protect themselves. My goal was to find something that worked well – not just for me, but for everyone, of any age, sex or physical condition.

“My experience as a police officer led me to understand that there is no time to think, you have to react,” he explains, describing the moment of an attack. “The martial arts works for me because of 30 years of training in some of the toughest *dojos* in the world, and 15 years of physical confrontations as a police officer.

“That doesn’t translate well to other people – to my clients,” he says. “I wanted to teach valid techniques that’d work for them, not for me. That brought me full circle – back to a Canadian teacher.”

Tony Blauer is a Montreal-based martial artist who developed the Spontaneous Protection Enabling Accelerated Response (SPEAR) System.

“It is the first genetically inspired martial art, and it does work,” he says. “But, prior to accreditation and full implementation, the program is currently being evaluated.”

Based on the instinctive flinch-response to danger, the SPEAR approach is actually better suited to those who haven’t been training to suppress their natural reactions.

“(Blauer) teaches the elite fighting forces in world: top law enforcement agencies and hostage rescue teams,” Allain describes. “His organization teaches 250 seminars a year, all over the world.”

Students at Allain’s Blue Dragon Martial Arts locations in Shanty Bay and Jarrett are exposed to both traditional karate and the SPEAR system.

Cindy Haché, mother of two young karate students at Blue Dragon Martial Arts, recently wrote a letter to Allain complimenting the varied curriculum and fun atmosphere that keep her boys engaged.

“How he gets all those kids to listen is a wonder to observe,” she writes. “I often ponder how I could achieve the same goal at home.”

She also details how she originally contacted Allain’s karate school because of its proximity to her home, but was pleasantly surprised to learn of his “exceptional qualifications”.

“People in Oro shouldn’t have to travel to Barrie or Orillia for their martial arts education,” Allain asserts, looking forward to the day when he sets up his permanent Oro dojo. “We are receiving great community support for our endeavors.”

In the meantime, Allain wants to “continue learning from the best and passing that on to my students.

His former teacher approves.

“He’s done very, very, very well,” says Segarra, who has visited Allain’s school and praises his holistic approach. “I’m very proud of him in what he’s accomplished.”

“My goal is to develop a multi-generational school in Simcoe County,” he reflects. “A safe place for men, women and children to learn world-class, quality martial arts in a family environment.”