

29 SOUTH OCEAN: COLLABORATIVE MARTIAL ARTS

By WTS Staff

Water Tiger School's studio home is a multi-family dwelling. 29 South Ocean in the village of Patchogue houses a mixed menu of martial arts. Our home is made possible through the generosity of Aikido at Suffolk Aikikai and the Monteleone Sensei, Gene and Deb.

We thought it might be nice to know about how this symbiotic relationship was formed, as well as learn more about the people and the art without whom Water Tiger would not have such a nice home.

It was not McElroy Laoshi's intention to teach T'ai Chi full-time when he and his wife, Lisa, moved to Long Island in 2000. It was certainly not his intent to open a studio. "I was still working for a software company that focused on elearning for customer service reps," he tells us. "I was laid off soon after the relocation in January 2001." His job search was finally meeting some success in the late summer of 2001, but — as many found — the market dried up after September 11, 2001. "I had to switch gears," he explains. "Through advice from a career development specialist, I decided to make a part-time gig into my career."



29 South Ocean houses a mixed menu of martial arts.

Water Tiger had existed in Iowa, but only as the entity that sponsored *T'ai Chi in the Park* and *World T'ai Chi & Qigong Day* events, as well as classes through continuing education, etc.

It was through Patchogue's first *World T'ai Chi Day* in April of 2001 that Laoshi met the Monteleones. Seeking to broaden the offering of the first event in the village, Laoshi sent an invitation to Suffolk Aikikai. While sharing time and arts in the gym at South Ocean Middle School, Monteleone Sensei offered his space to Laoshi. According to Sensei, "We had moved into the space in February of 2000 and always had the intention of finding other like-minded arts to share the location." He tells us he felt Laoshi and Water Tiger would be a nice fit with Suffolk Aikikai. But, it was not immediately to be. Laoshi was still in the midst of his training and development job search. He did not accept the offer until much later in the year. Water Tiger School held its first class on the mat on November 1, 2001.

"There were no students for a bit," admits Laoshi. But that wasn't really his primary concern. "That first night was my first step on the mat and my initial reaction was that I'd never be able to teach T'ai Chi on such a soft surface." But the challenge with the mat came to be seen as a blessing disguised as a challenge and students did start joining the studio. Sensei describes the relationship as "two koi fish flowing in and around each other in a peaceful pond. We blend, we never conflict."

And the rest, as they say, is history. But, what about the history of Suffolk Aikikai?

The dojo was founded in 1994. Monteleone Sensei Gene had studied for 15 years with Shihan (Master Instructor) Eddie Hagihara. It was actually on the mats that he met Monteleone Sensei Deb! Several senior students of Hagihara Shihan's dojo were leaving to establish dojo of their own. Deb, Jim and Chris Murray, and other founding members of Suffolk Aikikai helped lead Sensei to the decision to do the same and Suffolk Aikikai was born. Sensei tells, "I felt a real need to continue spreading the spirit and techniques of this art that was so deep, so special, so much more than a form of self defense." He adds that he was also feeling that the atmosphere at Hagihara Shihan's dojo no longer embodied what he felt was the true spirit of Aikido.

The next step was finding a space. Sensei had known Sensei Terry Maccarrone for many years and had even taught some of his students when his studio was located on Route 112 in the village. According to Sensei, "When we decided to create our own school, we sought out Maccarrone Sensei — since we knew of his solid reputation in the art of Shorin-ryu Karate and his unadulterated, traditional approach to his art." By this time, Karate USA had moved to its Grove Avenue location. They met with Maccarrone Sensei and explained their situation. "Sensei didn't even blink before he offered us space," says Monteleone

Sensei with a smile. “To this day, that is why I offer new instructors starting out in their arts a fair initial rent fee, until they are able to build up their membership and gradually afford to contribute more to the monthly nut.”

Suffolk Aikikai was on Grove with Karate USA for seven years before the roster started to require more space. Sensei tells us that the revenue stream seemed to be adequate to support a space of their own, so the search began. It wasn’t long before they found the 29 South Ocean storefront and negotiated a decent rental contract with the landlord.

When Suffolk Aikikai took the space, it was wide open and bare, with a wooden floor and a high ceiling. According to Sensei, these attributes made it perfect for Aikido. It did need paint and customization for a martial arts studio. Sensei says with smile, “One of the wonderful things about the students who are attracted to Aikido is their unselfish attitude and willingness to share their skills and donate their time — and materials — for the benefit of their school.” All of the work, including construction of dressing rooms, electrical and plumbing repair and changes, and installing the mat, was the shared effort of the students. Monteleone Sensei Deb is responsible for everything made of wood in the space. “Without the incredible woodworking skills of Deb, the dojo would not be as aesthetically pleasing as it is,” Sensei tells us with an even broader smile. We think there is no argument in recognizing the design and construction of the focal point of the front wall of the training area, or *shomen* (literally, *true face*), as her crowning achievement.



Monteleone Sensei Deb’s crowning woodworking achievement is the design and construction of the studio’s shomen (literally, true face).

Suffolk Aikikai’s Aikido is taught traditionally. According to Sensei this means that it is the art as it was created by its founder, O Sensei Morihei Ueshiba. It is the art as passed down to his original students by him, his son Kisshomaru, his grandson Moriteru, and their designated instructors. His son and grandson are the second and third *Dashu*, or leader of the system, respectively. Sensei cites Tomiki Aikido and Hapkido as examples of non-traditional teachings of the art. The former comes from Jigoro Kano, the creator of Judo, who sent his highest ranking student to study Aikido. Selected Aikido techniques were kept and a point system was added to create a competitive sport. The latter is the result of a Korean instructor learning Aikido from O Sensei. Aikido techniques were blended with various Korean arts. Sensei completes the story of the Suffolk Aikikai lineage:

The original and surviving Shihan of the US Aikido Federation all trained under O Sensei or his son, Kisshomaru, and still teach Aikido as it was intended by its creator. The USAF is directly affiliated with the Hombu Dojo in Tokyo, and all promotion certificates of Shodan (first-degree black belt) and above come directly from the Hombu Dojo. As a certified Shidoin (intermediate-level*) instructor of the USAF, I try to pass on these authentic techniques as I learned them from the Shihan.

Unlike Water Tiger School, Suffolk Aikikai is a non-profit endeavor. “When we first decided to open our own dojo,” Sensei explains, “we had no intention of earning a living by teaching Aikido.” He tells us that much personal money was invested in the development of Suffolk Aikikai. He and Deb hoped that they’d be able to recoup their investment. He happily tells us that with the additional martial arts programs — especially the “very timely” rental payments of Water Tiger — they are now paying themselves back and pocketing a small profit at the end of the year. We’re happy to help.

