

# Nu`uanu martial artist shares tales of sects, thugs, and rock n' roll

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Nu`uanu resident Steve McLaughlin has lived more in his 65 years than many people have in a lifetime. He's a martial artist, an acupuncturist, an aspiring writer, a computer systems analyst, an antique motorcycle restorer, a locksmith, and a fiancée. And that's just who he is today.

Steve McLaughlin teaching jujitsu. Courtesy: Steve McLaughlin



His story begins in Petaluma, California, where he was born the first child of three to Art and Junita McLaughlin. "My dad worked in construction right after World War II, and we moved to where the work was Northern California," he says. The family's home base, though, was in Southern California.

Shortly after McLaughlin's birth, the job ended and the family moved back down to the Los Angeles Basin, where his sisters Cookie and Nancy were born. The five of them lived there until 1960, when Art's work took him to Central Oregon. Young Steve was in the fourth grade.

McLaughlin kids, 1956. Courtesy: Steve McLaughlin



“Because the work sites were all over California at the time, I wound up in a different school every year- sometimes more!” he recalls. By the end of high school, the kids had been to 12 different schools throughout California and Oregon.

His time in Oregon was the most formative. “We lived in the deep woods in the Upper Umpqua River. That’s where my dad started really teaching me woodsmanship and animal husbandry, along with combat, weaponry, and survival skills. Every day I’d help raise livestock, and there’d be a lesson on how to use an ax to chop wood, a knife to defend yourself, a rifle to hunt, or basic forging for food,” he recalls.

The senior McLaughlin got his own training during World War II when he served as a Marine Corps master sergeant in “Carlson’s” 2nd Raider Battalion in the Pacific theater.

This frontiersman instruction continued until McLaughlin was graduated from Yoncalla High in 1969. After school ended, McLaughlin says he was feckless “and reckless,” so his father helped land Steve a job in Cambodia, a neutral country during the Vietnam War.

McLaughlin says in 1970 and 1971, he worked for an American contractor building “huts, shelters, sheds, whatever the people needed. Because we were a US presence in Cambodia, the Khmer Rouge continually attacked our work. Whatever we built, they would bomb. I nearly died three times, from a shooting, a bombing, and a passing disease which doctors didn’t even have a name for.” He was glad to leave Cambodia at the end of 1971 and move in with his parents, who had moved to Reno, Nevada to retire.

He retells how he escaped death in Cambodia, only to nearly meet it again just two weeks upon return to America. “I got into a major car accident while driving home from a construction job at Lake Tahoe. A car slid in the ice coming up the mountain and hit me head on. I went through the windshield and broke my back, then got knocked back into the seat, only to be rear ended by another car knocking me out of the car halfway and broke my leg against the open door sill. Another car hit us and knocked me down the roadside cliff, 50 feet into the valley below with four feet of snow. I had to throw snowballs up in the air so they could find me. “

McLaughlin spent nine months in the hospital recovering from a broken back (fourth thoracic vertebrae) and right thighbone. Two steel plates and 17 screws later, with the top of his right hip chiseled off for a bone graft, he has a right leg one and a half inches shorter than his left leg. “I had to learn to walk again,” he’s remarked a number of times over the nine years I’ve known him.

“I was big-time depressed, in incredible pain, and slowly going crazy,” he says so matter-of-factly now, when in retrospect, it was the peak of the most difficult time of his life. He finally got out of the hospital, got married, and attended physical therapy for six months.

Support from his parents and fiancée helped, as well as a part time job as a DJ for a rock n’ roll radio station in Reno. It’s an avocation McLaughlin picked up while in high school, working at KYES radio in Roseburg, Oregon (sidebar: he laughs at the idea that he was once youngest disc jockey in America.) It’s also a craft he dabbled in over a seven-year period, at

Pacific Northwest stations including KJR in Seattle, KPNW in Eugene, KSAN in San Francisco, and others.

There's no practical reason for it other than that era's rock and roll disc jockeys were stars, and it was "so, so much fun," he reminisces, then falls uncharacteristically silent. I suppose what happens in the radio booth, stays in the radio booth.

Ultimately, though, it was time and jujitsu that proved to be the biggest salve. He had mostly sat around for a year, and had mended enough to need an outlet for his boredom and frustration.

In November 1972, McLaughlin decided to sample martial arts. It was the early 70s, and "kung fu and karate were big."

After checking out five martial arts schools from the yellow pages, he walked into the Sparks Judo & Jujitsu Club, founded and owned by Sensei Herb LaGue. "It was the strangest thing I'd ever seen. There were black lights in the stairwell; meditation, yoga, and massage classes – it was just so off-the-wall compared to the other martial arts. It had everything. And it appealed to me!" chuckles McLaughlin of this decidedly untraditional school that specialized in Danzan Ryu jujitsu.

LaGue remembers that meeting. "He was very interested in learning jujitsu. Steve took to jujitsu like a duck to water, and learned very quickly."

Senseis LaGue and McLaughlin. Courtesy: Steve McLaughlin



This would be the beginning of a lifelong friendship. "It happened that we seemed to be of similar frames of mind in many areas. Steve is an exceptionally intelligent, loving, caring, loyal person whom I highly respect and hold dear within my heart," emotes LaGue. "I feel blessed to have shared our lives as we have done."

It was a heady time to be at the Sparks dojo, which itself had a spunky backstory. It was an old, two-story building that started life as a miners' union hall, and had brief stints as a dance school and massage parlor before ending up in LaGue's hands.

Students practiced on the second floor, and LaGue's family lived on the first floor – until he bought the house next door. Then, LaGue allowed his students to take up residence.

“It was like a commune. There were eight or ten men and women living there along with Prof LaGue when I joined. A lot of us lived there at one time or another. I probably lived there on and off for about ten years total,” reveals McLaughlin of the dojo and the art that were literally and figuratively always there for him.

He speaks of a makeshift automotive repair workspace outside the dojo, of racing cars or laying carpet for income with the guys, and generally immersing himself in this life. McLaughlin likens it to Kauai’s Taylor Camp, the hippie refuge that actress Elizabeth Taylor’s brother opened in 1969. “It was fun. It was like a big family. I have great memories of this time.”

As for jujitsu? “It helped open the doors to my imagination. Anything you could imagine, we were free to try. It was a safe place to be for us, and it encouraged curiosity instead of militaristic discipline. That’s the big difference between that school and many others,” he determines. “We could invent more martial art moves than other systems could study.”

As wonderful as the dojo was, McLaughlin needed a better income than the shared carpet-laying profits that supported the club. The 1970s ushered in a period of serious trouble for the US economy, sparked by the Arab oil embargos at the start of the decade. Stagflation drove McLaughlin south.

In 1975, he moved to Las Vegas where he says he worked for, eventually owned, then sold Frank Di’Armo’s Bodyguard Service. It made sense; he had decades of training in multiple martial arts and warfare combat.

Once, he recalls, he was involved in a shootout in the elevator of a big casino. Other than that, he confesses, “being a bodyguard in real life is nothing like the movies. Ninety percent of the time, it’s boring. Half the time, the client doesn’t even take it seriously and will do goofy things like try to go somewhere in public without telling us.”

In this business where “martial arts meets the road,” McLaughlin enlightens me that “there are two prices for a bodyguard service: Taking a bullet or not!” I hope I never have to know that firsthand.

In 1977, it was time to move back to Reno. McLaughlin had gotten remarried, and family planning was at the forefront. It certainly wasn’t compatible with a job that put his life at risk every day. He sold the business and headed back north with his wife, Linda.

McLaughlin cobbled together a paycheck however he could: Hanging sheetrock, working in warehouses, and racing cars and motorcycles. His days of working at a tremendously physical job would soon be forced to end.

In 1978, his first child, Noah, was born. That same year, McLaughlin says he took a 45 foot tumble off a Reno hotel while on a construction job, after he was bumped off a 90 foot construction scaffolding. He spent six months in the hospital for a broken back (this time, the fifth thoracic vertebrae) and a concussion that gave him black and white vision for four months. He spent nearly another year at home recuperating.

This was the second time he broke his back. He considers it his fifth near-death experience.

Each time, it rattled him- but he's a survivor. "It is so easy to sit around and wonder, 'Why me?' It is so easy to blame others for your problems. I did both of those things," McLaughlin contemplates.

He continues, "In the end, you're still sitting there by yourself, so the way to get past any depression is to just pick a goal and move on. Do something! It doesn't matter if the goal is realistic; it's about giving yourself a reason to look towards the future."

His future would be radically different. "The doctors told me I could no longer work construction, so I looked at a list of career opportunities and locksmith jumped out at me," he says.

In 1980, he found a job at A&J Locksmith in Sparks, where the owner taught him how to be a locksmith as well as gunsmith. "People don't know that 'lock, stock, and barrel' are gun terms, and locksmiths used to make the trigger lock mechanisms for the gun makers. There is a direct link between locksmithing and gunsmithing," he enlightens. The latter, McLaughlin would eventually specialize in.

Constantly curious, McLaughlin became interested in competitive pistol shooting, metallurgy, and blacksmithing. "I lived in Nevada. It was the Wild West!" he chuckles.

McLaughlin shares that he has a few patents on firearm designs, and patents pending on several wildcat cartridge designs for long-range handgun competition. He reminisces that he attended the highly prestigious Jeff Coopers Combat Firearms School in Gunsite, Arizona the first year it was offered, and that he's written about gun and knifsmithing for several gun magazines.

In 1980, McLaughlin's second son Quinn entered the world. The boy was born with spina bifida, a congenital defect of the spine, which often causes paralysis of the lower limbs and sometimes intellectual disability. Quinn's brain is fine and his legs aren't paralyzed, but at birth he had no control over them, nor his bowel or bladder.

Early on, Quinn learned bicycling helped develop and maintain his leg strength. "His mom was his biggest supporter for years, getting him into soccer and other sports. Quinn's very self sufficient. He was and still is a ball of steam. He's got a great sense of humor," smiles McLaughlin. "He wasn't hard to raise at all in his teens."

Of that precious time of fatherhood, McLaughlin reminisces, "Noah and Quinn were a riot. We would always laugh so hard we had to lie down on the floor." Neither boy was very interested in martial arts, despite the fact that their father was such an advanced disciple.

McLaughlin is 100 percent the proud father when he brags, "Noah went on to get a doctorate in French Cinema and wrote the Dungeons and Dragons game novellas. Quinn developed and wrote articles for handicapped mountain bicycling. He even bicycles to and from his kidney dialysis!"

Professionally, McLaughlin had become interested in computer science and pursued that line of work. In 1984, he opened a computer tutoring service called That Computer Guy.

Why computers? “They seemed, to me, so difficult it was beyond belief. I liked that... plus, we kept all our jujitsu notes on them!” explains McLaughlin.

To further his understanding, he enrolled at the University of Nevada, Reno in 1989, earning the first degree ever offered on the West Coast for Computer Graphics. “We used Commodore Amiga computers because they could run Macintosh and PC programs on them at the same time. It was and still is the single best computer ever made. Not many computer experts would ever argue with that!”

Then, he says, he bought Alpha Typography in Reno, “and made a good living printing the Reno Air Races booklets and much more. Later, I sold it to move to Hawaii.”

LaGue looks back on that period. “Steve’s house in Sparks was completely controlled by his computer. Amazing for those days! He has always been a high technology guy.”

In 1993, his wife’s social work job transferred her to Hawaii. It seemed like a blessing: Live in paradise and get a \$5,000 bump in salary!

Mc Laughlin at the Bushidokan, 2008. Courtesy: Steve McLaughlin



The only drawback was that McLaughlin would have to leave his beloved dojo (renamed by now the Bushidokan Dojo and Martial Arts Temple), where he had been teaching and practicing for 21 years, and had ascended to the ranks of a third degree black belt in jujitsu and a fourth degree black belt in judo. He also attained ranks in Hawaiian kempo karate, aikijutsu, and escrima.

At the dojo, he was no longer Steve. He was Sensei McLaughlin, a leading member of a school with over 350 students and guest teachers from all over the world who presented him with further opportunities to round out his knowledge of the defensive arts – kenjutsu (Japanese swordsmanship), savate (French kickboxing), and Small Circle Jujitsu (a style of jujitsu developed by Wally Jay of Hawaii).

He mentions that LaGue's curriculum included the world off the mat, so LaGue made the students aware of the arts of calligraphy, bonsai, and haiku; Japanese social studies, Japanese history, and more. "Skydiving was popular with the students. Prof LaGue has over a thousand jumps, and I learned how to fly a plane. I was more interested in flying a plane than jumping out of one," he says.

When he started, McLaughlin knew nothing of martial arts. When he left, he was a veteran senior instructor.

He loved it – "jijitsu is my favorite because you can get creative and inventive with it" – and knew saying goodbye to Sensei LaGue's dojo wasn't the end of his jijitsu career. In fact, it was quite a coincidence that their Danzan Ryu jijitsu originated in Hawaii. It's a jijitsu/Hawaiian lua hybrid created by Seishiro "Henry" Okazaki in the early 1900s.

The McLaughlins moved to Oahu, where he brought over his That Computer Guy business. He says he supplemented their income by teaching jijitsu and computer skills for a year at the Kebo Academy in Waipahu to 90 students after school.

For one year, he was also an associate social worker managing a home for runaway girls for Hale `Opio Kauai. "That was the hardest job I ever had," he says.

His passion, though, was planning for his own dojo. It would come about in the form of another incredible coincidence. He had just started working at Signs Today in Honolulu, when he met a new customer, Moira "Ipo" Maeda-Nakamine. Turns out she ran a hula school, Halau Nani Noe, and needed someone to share the rent with.

"He was good to work with. He is so nice, and he always had so much to share. Part of what he does in jijitsu involves energy work, and he was so passionate about it, he would take time to share with my haumana (students)," remembers Maeda-Nakamine.

In 1994, Hawaii Jijitsu Kodenkai opened its doors in partnership with Maeda-Nakamine's school. "It was more than a financial arrangement, though. There are lua techniques buried in our Danzan Ryu arts, and lua and hula are related," he elaborates.

McLaughlin is also proud of this nugget that combines two of his big loves, computers and jijitsu: "We were the first martial arts school in Hawaii with a web page, which I launched in 1994. Now, that makes it the oldest martial arts website on the Internet."

Never one to sit still, McLaughlin enrolled at the University of Hawaii at Manoa in 1996 to earn his Bachelor of Science in Computer Science. A week before his final exams, a car hit his motorcycle and broke his back (at the seventh thoracic vertebrae) and collar bone, and ruptured his spleen. UH Manoa allowed him to complete his tests after he got out of the hospital.

As soon as he was graduated in 1999, Hawaii Medical Service Association (HMSA) hired him. He's been there ever since, still working in Computer Hardware and Software Technology.

Seventeen years at a day job is McLaughlin's record, but that certainly doesn't mean he's let any grass grow under his feet. As one might expect by now, he continued to fill his life with hobbies, interests, challenges, and the occasional drama.

An old graphic promoting McLaughlin's underwater jujitsu course. Courtesy: Steve McLaughlin



He became a PADI Rescue Scuba Diver, which he says inspired him to develop, then offer, "the world's only underwater jujitsu course." On land, he rebuilt antique motorcycles, "including fully restoring a 1946 Indian Chief Bonneville Roadmaster in my garage!" he says.

His baby. Courtesy: Steve McLaughlin



He continued earning advanced jujitsu degrees under the supervision and approval of Sensei LaGue and the Bushidokan Federation, an affiliation of martial arts schools around the world that LaGue organized when he renamed his school to Bushidokan Dojo and Martial Arts Temple. The Federation awarded McLaughlin an eighth degree black belt in 2004 and his full Professor martial arts rank.

In 2006, he bequeathed Hawaii Jujitsu Kodenkai to some students, took a year off, then opened an entirely new dojo that he named Hawaii Zenyo Jujitsu Kai beneath a Shinto shrine in Nu`uanu. As a community outreach, he designed and offered a Women's Assault Prevention Course, which he still actively promotes today. "It's the single most successful women's self defense course in Hawaii!" McLaughlin states.

That's when I met him; I found his dojo by accident, was intrigued, and became a student in 2007. My husband, Claus, thought it sounded interesting and joined, too.

Hawaii Zenyo Jujitsu Kai, 2002. Courtesy: Steve McLaughlin



Maeda-Nakamine was, for a time, his jujitsu student. “He’s been through so much in his life that I notice he tries to share his knowledge with other students who are experiencing difficult times in their lives. Over the years I witness him helping several students in our dojo, and it seemed to have made a difference in them.”

Another one of his early students is Joshua Newman, who joined in 1997. “I found him through my friends Faye and Enda, who were his other students. They were looking for volunteers for massage class, which I declined on multiple occasions (I did not enjoy massages, but never had a good one up to joining jujitsu). Faye eventually convinced me into attending a special Sunday class with a visiting professor. I’ve been a student ever since.”

Newman, now a second degree black belt, lives overseas for work, but still attends classes when he’s back in Hawaii for visits, and considers himself an active part of the club. “I like several things about Prof’s teaching style,” he decides.

“He has always emphasized that while kata is important for learning and teaching, the core of jujitsu is ultimately about adaptability. His training has always been firmly grounded in practical self defense/real world applications. The dojo environment, in my experience, has been one of `ohana and supporting each other through learning, both on and off the mat. He has always pushed me to excel beyond my (perceived) limits, in a firm yet supportive manner,” asserts Newman.

Because Danzan Ryu includes healing arts in its curriculum (“If you break it, you fix it,” Sensei likes to remind us), learning to become an acupuncturist was a logical extension of McLaughlin’s lengthy involvement in the defensive arts. He himself obtained a massage license while living in Nevada.

From 2007 to 2012, McLaughlin juggled his day job, the dojo, and night classes at the Institute for Clinical Acupuncture & Oriental Medicine. After a very long five years (which we all felt at the dojo!), McLaughlin got his Masters of Science in Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine.



In 2012, the club members renovated a studio for his Christmas present. It is intended as his acupuncture clinic. Courtesy: Steve McLaughlin  
He would like to open his own acupuncture clinic when he retires one day, offering Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM), acupuncture, acupressure, skeletal alignment, and herbology, and has already threatened the jujitsu students that he's formulating lessons connecting TCM and martial arts.

"I am very proud of his following through and becoming an official Doctor of Acupuncture," beams LaGue, adding that acupuncture was one of the interests fostered at the Sparks dojo way back in the 70s.

"I'm not surprised at all that he takes on so much. He's always been so driven to learn," laughs Maeda-Nakamine about her friend, ex-business partner, and former jujitsu teacher.

"Steve has accomplished a great deal from time we first met," LaGue agrees. "He can be proud of himself."

McLaughlin and Katie Fisher, 2009. Courtesy: Steve McLaughlin



McLaughlin was again divorced by the time he met the beautiful Katie Fisher, a fellow student at the acupuncture school, in 2008. She's now his fiancée.

McLaughlin and Fisher, 2009. Courtesy: Steve McLaughlin

In the meantime, McLaughlin – despite nearly-believable protests that he’s so tired – is writing books about “martial arts/healing arts and their intersection with modern Western medicine and Oriental medicine,” and another one about his life.



He jokes that friends have encouraged him to add more life experiences for the sake of the book, “to make it more interesting.” His future plans are to marry Fisher, document the exploits of his cat SPOT, explore Europe more, ride (or repair when needed) his beloved vintage Indian Motorcycle, and, of course, keep practicing jujitsu.

This year, McLaughlin is celebrating his 44th year in martial arts, with no plans to quit. As he puts it, “These days, 65 is only middle aged! There is so much more to do yet!”

*Find Steve McLaughlin at [www.kupalehawaii.com](http://www.kupalehawaii.com) or Facebook: Steve McLaughlin (Hawaii Zenyo Jujitsu Kai).*

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