

Danny And Annie Small on their exploration of Aikido

Annie and Danny Smalls are a fundamental component of Aikido Schools of New Jersey (ASNJ). Everyone at the dojo knows their magnetic presence on and off the mat. Their loving practice is a shining example that goes beyond practice and offers lessons for daily life. We wanted to talk to our two instructors about how their mutual practice enhances their relationship and how, in turn, this manifests in their Aikido. Their bond on the mat is hard to miss with their Aikido being shaped in part by the love they have for each other after 25 years of marriage.



Annie and Danny's history training together begins in the 90's studying short form Tai Chi. Additionally, before Danny began his journey in Aikido, he trained in Tang Soo Do under Grand Master H.C. Hwang for 3 years. After life brought other challenges as life does, Danny and Annie returned to the mat to train together in 2005 and haven't looked back since. We caught up with Danny and Annie to talk about their journey together in Aikido.

How does *Aikido* influence your relationship?

Aikido fits with us amazingly well for us. Over the years we've met incredible people, created amazing bonds, and consider these people family. We love the community, everyone is so loving and supportive.

Aikido has become an extension of us, we are definite lifers!!

How does your *relationship* influence your Aikido?

Aikido is incredibly beneficial on so many levels, that we almost consider it medicinal. Strength, flexibility, endurance on the physical side. On the intellectual side, so much that happens on the mat transfers to the outside world. We both use Aikido in everyday life. We verbally blend and redirect rather than engage in confrontation. We often wind up in conversations that assume the circle, square, triangle geometry that we find on the mat. There is nothing like a busy day at work where you find yourself doing verbal randori. Aikido, specifically randori teaches you the value of priority management, in both of our careers, that is paramount as we are often dealing with crises on multiple levels or have urgencies thrust upon us during our days.

Has Aikido changed your relationship?

Most definitely!! The awareness we value so much on the mat has heightened our awareness of each other. Subtleties take on increased meaning, we have become more adept at reading each other and improved our nonverbal communication incredibly.

You have both moved on to become senior instructors at ASNJ. Does your relationship influence how you teach?

In any relationship, two come together to become one. It's similar in Aikido as we learn to blend with an attacker. We see ourselves in those we teach, always trying to keep a beginner's mind, and share tips on how we overcame our big challenges our Aikido evolved. We see each other in our students, and we value the trust given to us by our dojo to lead our student's development. It is an incredibly high honor.

Aikido Schools of New Jersey

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We bring the strength of our relationship to the mat to share with our Aikidoka. We strive to lead by example and be inclusive with the other Aikidoka we meet.

How do you observe Aikido's influence on other couples or families?

When it comes to families, we have seen Aikido deepen bonds. Since Aikido is a cooperative art, parents and children are both presented with a dynamic not usually experienced in the outside world. We have a saying that the dojo provides. The ASNJ community definitely helps its own with growth both on and off the mat. References for college, internships, potential career opportunities, as well as supporting the dojo family in a time of need as just some of the examples we've experienced over the years. Using Aikido as a developmental tool covers so much on so many levels. There are always new challenges, so there is always an opportunity

How has practicing together affected other aspects of your life such as hobbies or work?

A long time ago, Karen DePaola Sensei described Aikido as a lifestyle, and we couldn't agree more. It's a natural way to behave, a positive way to live and we incorporate as much as we can.

Do you have favorite techniques?

Annie has two, Shiho Nage and Kotegaeshi. Her low certain of gravity suck you in on those two, be warned! For Danny, there is nothing like a good old fashioned Koshi Nage!!

What is a group or two that could benefit from Aikido?

Everyone!!!! As we mentioned, Aikido is cooperative, we want everyone in the community to grow and we respect the fact that we all grow at different speeds. Furthermore, Aikido has a very positive outlook, easily transferred off the mat. We could all benefit from adding to our awareness, helping those around us, and setting a good example in the world we live in.

What are important lessons that people can draw from Aikido as you've observed them?

Life happens, emotions can create chaos in our worlds, so by trying to see, really see another's perspective and honoring that it is different, and ok to be different is a blessing we can all share. We come in different shapes, sizes, ethnicities, yet the practice of Aikido can unite people in a supportive, loving way.

How have Joseph, Stickles and Lehrman Sensei's influenced your and Anni's aikido?

Both of us feel incredibly blessed to have begun our Aikido careers under Rick Stickles Shihan. Aikido was a new art to me, and Annie's very first martial art, so for each of us, Stickles Sensei gave us our foundations in Aikido. We learned that each Shihan has their own lineage, that their lineage has profound influence on their developments, and that those teachings were passed down through each student. Stickles Sensei was a direct student of two of O'Sensei's students, primarily Y.Yamada Sensei, as well as Chiba Sensei. At first, we both faced challenges, as Aikido and it's tenants seemed counterintuitive at times. We practiced, practiced more, and then kept practicing. Over time, we built Aikido into our daily lives. We came to understand that how we perceived the world had changed through our training, and continues to do so each day.

Our early Aikido was rooted in Sensei Stickles martial awareness combined with Aikido's circular movement and relationship to the sword/ken. Sensei Stickles stressed developing our practice through

repetition of movements, a fundamental sword practice, and opening our minds to see the connection between the two. Stickles Sensei stressed that a good meditation practice would connect the mind-body-spirit experience of Aikido. Stickles Sensei encouraged our development by challenging us to get out of our comfort zones, to visit other dojos and participate in seminars. As it turns out, the more we advance, the more Aikido becomes a personal art. While both us practice Aikido, we do have similarities, and yet we also have grown in ways that makes our Aikido unique.

After Sensei Stickles untimely passing, we were fortunate enough to have Joseph Roy take the mantle of chief instructor. Joseph had spent 15 years with Stickles Sensei and we had witnessed firsthand his development from Deshi to more than capable instructor. All those countless hours with Stickles Sensei, forged skillsets that is also unique and quite formidable. And while Joseph was a direct student of Stickles Sensei, Joseph's Aikido also benefitted from his training in Iaido, and his early years in Karate. His Aikido is also personal, and Joseph strives to push our boundaries, and further develop our Aikido. Furthermore, Joseph is often in Hal Lehrman Sensei's classes in either NY Aikikai or Park Slope, this gives us another unique advantage as Joseph develops his practice and then also helps us bridge the knowledge that is shared by Lehrman Sensei.

Lehrman Sensei is a student of Tohei Sensei, also one of O'Sensei's students, and also Rick Stickles Sensei's earliest mentor in the Aikido world. Each one of O'Sensei's original students have different backgrounds in martial arts before studying Aikido, and those background manifest in their teachings. Through Tohei Sensei, there was indeed martial awareness, and yet, he stressed more internal awareness, and through that a near detachment from your attacker and concentration on Nage's movement. Lehrman Sensei extolls the virtues of Tohei Sensei's four axioms of Ki to harmonize our mind, body and spirits....keep one point, relax completely, weight underside, and extending Ki through our movement. Lehrman Sensei embodies these teachings, combined with his own background in ballet/dance, he brings to us his perspective... our movement is the focal point, not uke, not the attacker. We work on letting go, of releasing ourselves from the threat, and moving our bodies without the focus on the attack. It sounds easy, however in reality it is so challenging to let go!!!

So, we continue to practice, practice more, train, read, and meditate. Our practice is now medicinal, helping us to sustain a happy, healthy life through vigorous training!!

