

# ‘TO FACE ONESELF HONESTLY AND TO TRAIN SERIOUSLY’

## INTERVIEW

### ‘To Face Oneself Honestly and to Train Seriously’

*The following interview with Mr. Ohshima by San Francisco dojo member Jane Uyeda was published during the Nisei Week in Rafu Shimpō Los Angeles Japanese Daily News on Tuesday, August 6, 1996.<sup>1</sup>*

**Q: Mr. Ohshima, back in 1957, you made the first public demonstration of karate in the United States. What was martial arts like 40 years ago in this country?**

Some of my original members who were in the U.S. Armed Forces saw my demonstration in Tokyo in 1952. However, the American public did not know about karate until we made this Nisei Week demonstration.

**Ohshima:** Well, 40 years ago nobody knew of any other martial arts except kendo and judo. Karate started to become fashionable after the Korean War because many young GIs, including Nisei [second generation] soldiers, went to Tokyo during and after the war and saw karate demonstrations.

By the 1960s, karate enjoyed worldwide recognition and was no longer an unknown word anymore in most countries.

**Q: How was karate introduced at the Nisei Week Festival?**

**Ohshima:** I think we have to go back before the 1950s, when Nisei Week was already having demonstrations of martial arts such as kendo and judo. Once I even saw a pre-1940 photograph of over 500 people participating in a kendo exhibition at Nisei Week on First Street.

After World War II, only two martial arts tournaments existed at Nisei Week—judo and kendo. We became the third one in 1957, when we asked the Judo Federation if we could make a demonstration during the judo tournament.

**Q: Was this the first demonstration of karate in America?**

**Ohshima:** It was the first karate demonstration in America given by an American karate organization. There might have been some other kind of demonstration before World War II, when Master Funakoshi’s senior, Master Kentsu Yabu, was in Los Angeles. It is said that he made one demonstration. Only some Japanese children, PTA members, and people from the Okinawa Kenjinkai saw that demonstration.

But the first official demonstration of karate to the American public was this Nisei Week karate demonstration that Shotokan Karate of America (then known as the Southern California Karate Association) presented, starting in 1957.

**Q: What role did the Japanese-American community in Los Angeles play in the introduction of karate?**

**Ohshima:** Because karate was so new and not well-known, I had to rely on Japanese Issei [first generation] pioneers

such as Mr. Junichi Yoshidomi, then president of the Japanese Chamber of Commerce, Mr. Masuo Nitamura, a later JCC president, journalists of the Japanese-American newspaper such as Mr. George Nozawa, kendo instructors such as Master Torao Mori, and judo teachers Sensei Kaname Kuniyuki and Sensei Tatsuo Inoue.

The day of the demonstration, a few of these people even came to stand by the door to greet people all day. Also, religious leaders, such as Reverend Daiichi Tsuyuki from Konko Church, Bishop Kenko Yamashita, who is the head of Zenshuji Temple, and Reverend Shoki Mohri of Nishi Hongwanji Temple, were very supportive from the beginning. I believe without the support of these Japanese-Americans, this demonstration would not have been possible.

**Q: How were you able to reach the younger Japanese-Americans?**

**Ohshima:** Until Maryknoll School had a karate club starting in 1963, we didn’t have a group of younger generation Japanese-Americans. Because the Japanese community was spread all over Southern California, it was increasingly difficult for children to come downtown anymore. But heaven gave me a chance to teach at Maryknoll School, where there were some exceptional young people.

By 1970, the Maryknoll Karate Club started to host the Nisei Week karate demonstration. And so, for the last quarter century, the Maryknoll Karate Club has been the core of this Nisei Week Karate Exhibition and Tournament.

**Q: How has the Nisei Week Karate Exhibition changed over all these years?**

**Ohshima:** Well, we try to not be influenced by outside trends. We try to demonstrate karate which is closest to traditional training and to real combat. But, of course, we have to communicate our techniques and some rules to outside groups, since we don’t want to be completely isolated.

But our main goal is to present karate in the traditional manner and mentality to the public, and if they have misunderstandings, we try to give the right information. If outside groups have a better understanding, of course, we have no hesitation to learn from them.

**Q: Have you had other groups come to participate over the years?**

**Ohshima:** In the beginning, we had many outsiders try to come. But we always have been non-commercial, and as a result, we don’t offer prize money, we don’t charge entrance fees, and we don’t do a lot of publicity. So even though we are the oldest and most traditional group, we are not a major tournament group.

<sup>1</sup> Rewritten by [Maryknoll Shotokan Karate Club](#), July 21, 2005.

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### **Q: Has this tournament had nationwide influence?**

**Ohshima:** Our tournament was first televised by CBS in 1958 or 1959, and I'm sure many tournament producers and directors got some of their ideas from our Nisei Week Tournament.

### **Q: Do you have memorable moments from the Nisei Week Tournament?**

**Ohshima:** Oh yes, countless memories! I can't say which were the most important. There have been many young men who have tried their best. But in a way, for our group, it is a kind of festival. We enjoy having the demonstration, but the tournament is not the main attraction. It doesn't mean that much to us who wins the tournament. That's what's different from other tournaments, especially commercially based tournaments that emphasize the champion, who looks like he is higher than all his competitors.

Our tournament is not like the Olympic Games. We feel that the tournament is a very incomplete game, and so we don't emphasize it as the goal. Somehow, the Nisei Week Exhibition and Tournament itself has value. It is a traditional, historic, authentic and serious karate demonstration. It's not because of the personalities that participate that makes it important.

### **Q: So you're saying the tournament and exhibition of karate itself is precious?**

**Ohshima:** In this society, the fact that we are a non-profit group and have continued to bring quality martial arts to the general public for 40 years, I think that is very precious. I don't believe that any other karate organization has this kind of an activity. So all members of Shotokan Karate of America and members of the Japanese community, especially the Maryknoll Karate Club, should be proud that we are keeping this exhibition to demonstrate our traditional mentality for the next generation.

### **Q: How should we encourage the younger generation?**

**Ohshima:** This is the very difficult part. In the beginning, it was very easy since we were the only karate organization. Now, however, everywhere you have so many different kinds of disciplines and many commercial groups. But for those children whose families recognize the value of this kind of training, and may one day want them to start practice, we should have a place, a group, and a teacher for them.

I believe that we should encourage the younger generation to train seriously to learn what is important in human life. We should do this before we pursue our studies, before we get a profession, before we start a family.