

Women in Martial Arts Roundtable No. 2: Why did you start studying martial arts and what were the key factors that determined your ability as a woman to advance?

Martial arts promises to provide important tools and practical skills for self-defense, particularly for women and girls. Yet, participation in martial arts continues to be dominated by men, raising at least two questions: What role does martial arts play in self-defense, and why aren't more women and girls studying martial arts? To answer these questions and others, SR Staley (www.srstaley.com) convened a roundtable discussion with six highly experienced female martial artists (bios at the end) to discuss the role of women in martial arts as part of a broader discussion on violence, self-defense, and martial arts.

*The following discussion was prompted by the questions: **Why did you start studying martial arts, and what were the key factors that determined your ability as a woman to advance?***

Discussion moderated and edited by SR Staley

Rumiko Hayes: Growing up in Japan in the 1960's, there was a first wave of the Ninja Boom in the show business world and children were fascinated with the Ninja Animé called *kaze no fujimaru*. I was not the exception. I wanted to be a superhero. Even though it focused on a young male ninja as the story line, I was fascinated and something in me sparked a wish to become a ninja. As I grew up, the Ninja Boom was gone and the dream of becoming the ninja disappeared somewhere.

Then I met Stephen [K. Hayes] who introduced me to the world of the ninja again. Since there was the flame already, it did not take a long time to get fascinated again.

Laura Giancarlo: Yes! I'd forgotten that being a superhero was on my list too! I remember reading *Tall Tales* when I was a kid and truly loving Pippi Longstocking. Her ability to be as strong as every man in her village just seemed awesome to me! I also loved Bat Girl, the Bionic Woman and Wonder Woman (laughs)! Oh, and even now, I loved ElastiGirl in the animated film *The Incredibles*! You know.... I think that I still want to be a superhero (laughs).

Mary Stevens: As a kid, after seeing [the movie] *The Karate Kid*, I wanted to be the hero—to have the inner strength to win honorably; to learn magic hand tricks from an ancient master seemed cool too.

Kriss Hurdle: I really admire the stories of the people (women and men) that always wanted to practice martial arts (notice I didn't say "do" martial arts) from the time they were a child.... Quite frankly, I am a bit jealous (smiles).

Key factors for me starting in marital arts as a novice included the sense of community. The drive to achieve two black belt ranks in my particular art was another factor. I am stubborn, like to win, have this weird nagging that doesn't go away until I finish what I start; those factors drive me.

Theresa Murphy: My reason for studying martial arts was purely to keep in shape. For me it was a great alternative to running, weight lifting, aerobics, etc. What kept me going was that it was a fun way to stay in shape, too. I have since studied and taught Kempo Karate, studied Tai Chi, and currently train in both To-Shin Do and the Bujinkin [Ninjutsu].

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Giancarlo: Like Theresa, I don't think that my goal was to achieve a black belt. My reasons for beginning training were to learn to protect myself. I grew up the last of four children and the runt of the litter. Being the youngest and the smallest taught me that I had better learn how to defend myself. Also, I was always the smallest student in the class so I did experience some bullying from the other students as well. I was living away from home in a college dormitory and needed to feel that I was doing something that would help me to survive should something happen that endangered my safety. That's when I started training in martial arts

Hurdle: By the time I was into martial arts, earning a black belt was the goal (though not the first goal). Higher level black belts and other martial arts happened because the martial arts became my career choice; somewhere along the line I decided it was what I do and has become a big piece of who I am.

Murphy: I never started martial arts to earn a black belt. I started at the urging of a college roommate as something she thought I would enjoy. So I tried it, starting first with Shotokan Karate and Tae Kwon Do which I did enjoy immensely.

Hayes: I wanted to know about the way ninja operated not only in physical realm but also at mental level. I read Dr. Hatsumi's books, and I was asked to translate the content for Stephen. Thus, my training started. I did not know what the *Ichimonji Kamae* looked like when Volume 1 of Stephen's Ohara [book] series came out.

Stevens: The key for me was finding a martial art that addressed my self-defense realities. I've never been attacked by a

stranger but most programs teach you to just unleash and go to town on the attacker. But when it's someone I love who is drunk and stupid, I don't necessarily want to kill or maim them. I wanted a scalable answer where I could use my intelligence to make decisions.

Murphy: After graduating college, I started Kempo Karate. In addition to staying in shape, I enjoyed learning the forms/kata. They were martial arts dances that I found interesting and at times beautiful and empowering. I also became a Kempo Instructor.

Tori Eldridge: As a professional Broadway dancer, I had utilized my body in just about every way a human can move. That's one of the great strengths of a broad (ballet, jazz, tap, modern, hula, hip-hop, etc.) dance background. When you add gymnastics, diving and other sports to that mix (as I did at an early age), the physical vocabulary becomes infinite. What that means is that there is no new movement, but rather different ways to combine and execute movement. That is a huge advantage.

For example, on my first day of Tang Soo Do, I performed the first two choreographed forms (*kata*) solo without ever having been taught, or even having tried, to do them. I had learned from watching my son in his classes. On that same day I performed every spin and jumping kick they had. It was crazy fun. Then, the teacher got excited and had me spar students of a variety of colored-belt ranks. That was overwhelming! But also strangely exhilarating (laughs). The only reason I was able to do any of that was because all of it fell within my vocabulary of movement.

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Giancarlo: My martial arts career started when I was at the university. I was a cheerleader for the university's basketball team at that time. As a member of the team I had a complimentary membership at a local gym which also happened to be the home of an eclectic martial arts system. One of the instructors of the school happened to see that I had some gymnastics ability and asked me to participate in a video that he was making about one of the martial arts systems that he taught. Being young and thinking that this was a totally cool thing to do I said "Yes"!

The basic kicks and punches were fairly easy to mimic and my gymnastics background gave the ability to make the skills that I was learning look pretty good. I am pretty certain that my execution of these skills would *not* have been very effective, but they looked good and I could do them with a little style (laughs).

I had a great time working with the other students and the two instructors that were there and decided that I wanted to continue my training based on both this experience and my long held belief that as a person of small stature, it would be a good idea to learn to protect myself. I understood that potentially I could be seen as an easy target for someone with ill intentions and I didn't want that to happen.

Hayes: There were not many female martial arts practitioners and I trained with male students in Japan and in the U.S. I became fascinated with the skill that I was learning. What? You do not have to be big and strong? That was the totally new concept in the martial arts.

Dr. Maasaki Hatsumi put a lot of responsibility on me as Stephen was trying to spread

this art to the world by writing books and doing seminars, which involved much personal and professional risk. I felt that we were a team. And we are still a team. We keep going.

Giancarlo: Of course growing up in the seventies there weren't many opportunities for girls to train either because there weren't many schools around or because it was socially unacceptable to do so. There was a judo school very close to my house that I wanted to attend but my father wouldn't allow me. In fact, when I did start training during my college years I didn't tell my dad about it until I became injured and he asked me how it happened. His response at that time was "if someone bothers you, you come and get me." Although I appreciated his love for me, it was clear that his response was not very practical.

Murphy: What keeps me going now is not the quest for physical fitness (though that is attained through it also) that drove me in other arts. I train to increase my awareness physically, intellectually and spiritually. I train to become more capable of defending myself and those around me, to refine my movements, to teach other women, men and children how being able to defend yourself physically gives you a sense of power and peace that carries in to all aspects of your life. I train to become *Tatsujin* [completed human being].

Giancarlo: Since attaining a black belt, my training has become more about developing all aspects of myself. Like Theresa said, "to become *Tatsujin*."

Hurdle: I have a framed picture on our desk at the dojo—all black with white letters—it simply says *Tatsujin*. I wonder what it feels like....

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Stevens: After achieving black belt, I think perseverance is my best success factor. I just won't settle for not getting it. I also have awesome teachers who are patient but motivating and dedicated to me achieving excellence.

Hurdle: What were the key factors that determined my ability to advance as a woman in martial arts? Funny question, seeing that the only prospective I have is of a woman, and my ability has more to do with the sum of my whole than just the "woman in the martial arts" piece!

Giancarlo: I think that being an athlete in my younger years contributed to my belief that achieving a black belt was possible. Being a gymnast as a kid I knew what it was like to train hard, I had experienced injuries and set backs and I had tough coaches. These experiences formed the foundation for my training in the martial arts in many ways.

Murphy: To advance meant learning and memorizing more *kata* and increasing my physical prowess, strength, etc. As I became a new mom of one and then two children, my time to do this [train in martial arts] diminished and I started to question if what was required to advance was becoming more and more physically fit and refined. How could I do that with less time, and what would that mean in five, ten or twenty years?

At that point I started to look for something different, something more. I started Tai Chi. I started attending martial arts seminars of all styles (all taught by men).

Stevens: It was the elemental model which had choices based on circumstance, rather than assuming I only had one choice, that attracted me to To-Shin Do. I am not a

gazelle being hunted by a lion who can only run and hide in the pack. I'd rather be the lioness who hunts and protects the pack, and in To-Shin Do I felt like I had options. I didn't have to be bigger, stronger, thinner, or faster in order to win. I could start right where I was and strip away what wasn't working.

When I first took self-defense in college (it was a class that mixed a Swedish form of self-defense and Poekelan), it focused on eye gouges, knee breaks, and massive annihilation. We also did stuff like climbing our instructor, not wearing sunglasses (they are unnecessary armor to keep us from really experiencing life), and dancing. I was glad it wasn't rows of people all doing the same thing. But I felt like it was missing something and it turned out that the difference was that there was no intelligence. There was spirit. There was guts. There was heart. But there was no brain.

After graduation, I moved to North Carolina and wanted something to do after work. I searched the phone book for activities and made an appointment at Chapel Hill Quest Center. I joined that same night and by Yellow Belt I was sure I'd be a black belt and own a school someday.

Eldridge: The seeking nature is what led me to To Shin Do. I am easily bored by physical activities that don't stimulate the mind. I'm very stimulated during my charge towards competency and strength, but having arrived, I lose the interest in doing the same old thing. That was the problem with Tang Soo Do and cardio classes, weight training, etc. To Shin Do, on the other hand, engages me physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually. It has a purpose in my life other than simply providing exercise, or even self-

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defense. And that purpose is deep enough to evolve as I evolve as a person.

Murphy: I got lucky and attended a Mark Davis Seminar. He moved so fluidly and spoke of the Grandmaster Hatsumi Sensei and the goal of becoming *Tatsujin*: A fully actualized human being. It was different than anything I had seen or heard at any martial-arts seminar or class. So then I found two training groups in my area and tried Ninjutsu. The art, being based on successful principles brought home from survivors of battles and then taught through the ages, could be adapted to individuals and build on their unique strengths and capabilities.

In my first class we were working on a rear hip throw. I was paired with a large, very strong man. I was having a difficult time trying to throw him the way I had been previously taught. [Mark Davis] then instructed me to stop running into him, move into the space, bend my knees, turn and walk. The next thing I knew he was flying and I felt like I didn't do anything. It was magic. I could make guys fly effortlessly and I was hooked.

At the time I was scheduled to test for my third degree black belt in Kempo which I then decided not to attend and left all other belts and martial arts behind. I happily put on a white belt and started training in Ninjutsu.

Hurdle: What accounts for my ability to advance once I was introduced into To-Shin Do? As a novice...well, what is a novice? I know more now of what I don't know. I know people that are clearly novices, and people that don't realize that they are novices. Certainly the curiosity of what is in the next room, who I can become so that I can be a better mom, wife, business partner,

etc. is the driving force now. The wonderment and excitement when you follow the eight steps and then remembering to take stock of what is happening around you—those are all factors that keep me advancing.

Giancarlo: In the beginning an important factor in my training was that I felt strong when I trained. I was in great shape, full of energy, and my confidence increased with training. I also trusted my teachers and felt that they could guide me along my path to learn to defend myself. Although there weren't any female instructors at that time, there were a few women in the school who had attained *shodan* level, and I felt that if they could achieve their black belt then there wasn't anything that should stop me from doing the same.

Another key factor was that every time that I took a break from training I felt myself becoming less grounded, less focused and I didn't like that. Training regularly helps me to keep my feet on the ground and moving in the direction that I feel benefits my life. I also find it intellectually stimulating. Learning technical and tactical strategies is often difficult. Integrating these lessons into your movement with the right timing can be challenging at times. I also love people, so being around the other people in the dojo brings me certain amount of joy and allows me to have a social outlet too. So for me, it really is something that feeds me in physical, intellectual and spiritual ways.

Eldridge: I suppose the key factors that determined my ability to advance were: 1) a familiarity with a broad range of movement, 2) discipline that's both self-directed and self-motivated, and 3) a seeking nature. Of course, I don't think any of these factors are intrinsic to being a woman or helpful to women in particular.

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Now, over the years I still had to perfect the movement, learn the application and strategy, as well as build strength, grit and timing—first in Tang So Do Karate, and later in To Shin Do Ninjutsu. After transitioning to the ninja art, I had to learn new ways of combining and executing

movement. And of course, a whole new way of application, strategy, etc.

Discipline is more self-explanatory. Suffice it to say that being self-motivated and self-directed kept me progressing and engaged in spite of obstacles or slumps that cause many people to stop.

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About the Participants

SR Staley (moderator, www.srstaley.com) is an award-winning author of young-adult and middle grade fiction as well as five books on public policy. He coaches martial-arts based self-defense at Renegade Boxing Club in Tallahassee, Florida, and is on the faculty of the College of Social Sciences and Public Policy at Florida State University. His middle-grade novels *A Warrior's Soul* and *Renegade* are action/adventure stories that address violence, bullying and self-defense using a martial-arts theme and perspective.

Rumiko Hayes is a native of Japan and co-founder with Stephen K. Hayes of the martial art of To-Shin Do (www.skhquest.com). Their affiliated schools have graduated more than 1,000 black belts since its founding in 1997. A long-time student of Ninjutsu Grandmaster Masaaki Hatsumi, she is also the mother of two grown children, both female, who have earned advanced black belts.

Tori Eldridge (www.torielldridge.com) is a practitioner of To-Shin Do (5th Degree black belt) and author of *Empowered Living: A Guide to Physical and Emotional Protection* among other works. She has a rich and varied career as an entrepreneur, teacher, actress/singer/dancer on Broadway, TV and film, a screenwriter and novelist.

Theresa Murphy is co-owner of Shinobi Martial Arts Center (www.shinobi-martial-arts.com) in Plaistow, New Hampshire and the mother of two teenage daughters. She has earned black belts in To-Shin Do (3rd Degree), Bujinkan Ninjutsu, and Kempo Karate (where she also served as chief instructor in her dojo). She has also studied Tae Kwon Do, Tai Chi, and Shotokan Karate. Theresa is the co-founder of the self-defense curriculum Lessons In Violence Evasion (LIVE).

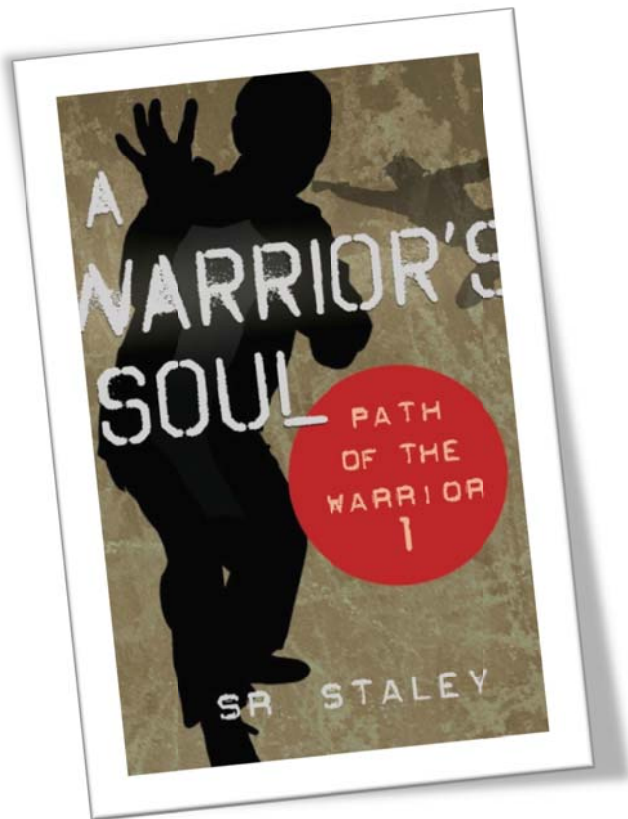
Laura Giancarlo has been training for the last 27 years in the various ninja arts as well as other martial arts. She has earned black belts in To-Shin Do (5th degree), Bujinkan Ninjutsu (1st Degree), Okinawan Shorin ryu (1st degree), and Tae Kwon Do (1st degree). An athlete all her life, Laura has participated in a variety of sports including gymnastics, dance, yoga, softball, and collegiate cheerleading. She has also served as an instructor of martial arts and fitness classes. She lives with her husband in West Chapel, Florida where she enjoys teaching science to middle school students.

Mary Stevens is the owner of the Quest Center for Martial Arts (www.boulderquet.com) in Boulder, Colorado, and earned her black belt in To-Shin Do (4th Degree).

Kriss Hurdle co-owns Newbury Park Martial Arts Center in California (www.npmac.com) where she holds the title of Head Kunoichi. She is a 4th Dan in To-Shin Do and holds Black Belts in Tang Soo Do, Hapkido and Escrima. She is a Reiki Master and specializes in self-protection and self-development and energy work for women, men and children. She is a proud Mom of two and happily married for almost 18 years.

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“The story is an excellent one... The author’s writing brings the story and emotion to life—fear, anger, frustration, and trying to establish a power base—[and are] poignant to any age range.” 🌟 Beck Valley Books

“My middle school students had the amazing opportunity to help proof *Renegade*. When we finished they told me that every teacher, principal and staff at a middle school should be required to read it. One of the students who is now in high school read the finished book in two days. I asked him if he still liked the book with the changes and he said, ‘No, I love it.’ This book not only grabs the attention of students because they can relate to it but also shows them a way to make things better.” 🌟 *Charlene Irvin-Brown, Reading teacher, St. Cloud, Minnesota*

“SR Staley's gritty and gripping story brings to life the kind of dilemmas today's kids can face on a daily basis, and provides important lessons for how martial arts training can become a touchstone for how to find our way through life.” 🌟 *Stephen K. Hayes, member of the Black Belt Hall of Fame, Founder, To-Shin Do Martial Arts*

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“I was transported into the story.” 🌟 *Bookreviewvenue.com*

“Many of my students in middle school can relate to this and that is why this book is now sitting on my shelf for anyone to read.” 🌟 *Liveteachcreate.com*

