

Meeting the Masters: Wally Jay (1917-2011)

Over my 50+ years of training in budo, I have been lucky enough to meet or train under many notable martial artists. This year, I want to share my impressions, some deep set, some fleeting, about the men and women I met on the way.

Almost everyone who knew him liked Professor Jay. Once a master from the West Coast told me of a conflict he had with Professor Jay and I was shocked. Not being able to hear both sides of the argument, I just put it on hold, but I can tell you that every interaction I had with Professor Jay was positive, upbeat, and encouraging. He did not seem to attract conflict and, in fact, went to pains to avoid it.

I first met Wally Jay at an outdoor seminar sponsored by Master Dave Castoldi. After having taught several individual locks, Professor Jay showed a rapid-fire chain of them, quickly going from one lock to another so that the *uke* could neither fall, nor slap out. Because I had been doing aiki-ju-jutsu for quite a while at that time, I caught on quickly while others struggled with the combinations. In the locker room after the seminar, Sensei Jay asked me if I would be interested in joining his organization, Jiu-jitsu America. I politely demurred explaining that I was the inheritor-designate of my late instructor's organization and was working to make that strong again. He understood and never mentioned it again.

Several years later, I sponsored Professor Jay at my own dojo and asked his permission to videotape the seminar. He cordially gave his consent despite the fact that he was planning videos of his own, and for decades afterwards complemented us on our shoot, which he called "my favorite video of my material". Even later in life, after Professor Jay had curtailed his busy travel schedule, he asked me for another copy of the video, and of course I sent him a few. That shoot started me in the martial arts video business, and although I am the instructor in most of the videos we produce, I do have impressive guest instructors from time to time for whom Wally Jay set the standard.

His wife Bernice was cordial and warm to my dad while they watched Professor Jay's seminar together, and she would ask about him over the phone when I called the Professor occasionally.

Having attended several other Wally Jay seminars in the 1980s, I was invited to teach for Jiu-jitsu America at a large New England convention in 1989. There I met jiu-jitsu's Sig Kufferath, judo's Willy Cahill, JKD's James DeMile, and Wally's son Leon. I also met an



instructor who was attracted to what I was teaching and wanted to leave Jiu-jitsu America to join my federation. I explained that he had to clear everything with Professor Jay before I would consider instructing him and I called Professor Jay first so that he knew what was going on. I was surprised to hear that he was not upset at potentially losing an instructor and a member school, but responded with, “As long as he’s learning something, it’s okay.”

The editor of *Inside Karate* once asked me if I thought Wally Jay was a traditionalist or a modernist. My response was “Yes.” He was certainly not continuing an ancient Asian system, having created his Small Circle Jiu-jitsu in the 1950s, and he certainly was not afraid of thinking for himself or challenging the established methods of performing techniques, but that was precisely the ju-jutsu tradition he continued: functional techniques from discernable ju-jutsu roots taught in a way that any martial artist could learn. It was a relatively new tradition from Hawaii to Maine, admittedly, but an old one from Japan to Hawaii.