

Still Kicking

by Rachel Boyes
Monterey County Weekly, Jan 24, 2002



Mary Burr, who has danced most of her life, started studying Aikido seven years ago at the tender age of 73. She was drawn to its graceful style of movement and emphasis on harmony.

Under the high-beamed ceiling of Aikido of Monterey's sanctuary-style dojo ("place of practice"), a half-dozen students shift and stir in anticipation. There is the sense that any minute something big is going to happen. Even the serene atmosphere supplied by the light filtering into the white-walled room is not enough to stifle it.

Finally, the tension eases. Michael Smith, the instructor, spots a compact woman with edgy cropped brown hair gathering her fluffy cohort from a car outside. "Mary is here, and-oh good, she brought her dog Aiku," he says with relief. Mary Burr, who recently celebrated her 80th birthday by getting her black belt in Aikido, opens the door, the sun backlighting her sturdy frame.

The six men who will be joining her for the twelve o'clock session of class this day are all at least 20 years her junior. As they congratulate her on her recent achievement,

Burr deflects the attention. She still can't believe that she passed the test, and asks Smith how she did it.

"Well, you worked hard for it, Mary," he says, "and you deserve it, there's no question. Plus, you have some of the prettiest forward rolls I've ever seen."



Burr was once a Broadway dancer. She seems to emit star quality naturally-it shines through in her every movement, much like the determination that prompted her to begin the study of Aikido at age 73. She says this self-defense art, whose primary focus is to create harmony with one's opponent rather than conflict, seemed to her "beautiful, and easy after training for so long as a dancer." However, after initiating the process, Burr admits, she realized how complex it is. "Ballet is sort of airborne," she says, "whereas Aikido is very grounded."

"At first, I was scared to death to throw myself on the floor. But the instructors don't let you think that way. They don't let you think negatively."

For Burr, taking risks has been a way of life. Not until her mid-40s did she settle in Carmel to raise her three children and take up a teaching position in the graphic arts department of the Monterey Peninsula College. Until that time she danced her way around the world, first teaming up with the San Francisco Ballet at age 13, and then

joining The American Ballet in 1946, where she performed nightly at the Metropolitan Opera House. At 28 she was cast as a can-can dancer in the Broadway musical "Paint Your Wagon," for which she received widespread acclaim for her famous high-kicking performances.

Burr's most recent venture, however, began when a model she was painting in one of her art classes took her to an Aikido class.

"I felt so welcome there," she says. "I was hooked from day one." Burr now takes Aikido at least five days a week. She also trains in Pilates three to four days a week to help with muscle strength. This afternoon, she has just come from one such session, where she worked out with dojo-cho (chief instructor) of Aikido of Monterey, Danielle Smith, a woman Burr continually refers to as "an incredible, spiritual, and amazing human being." She credits Smith with fostering the type of community sentiment that is evident to anyone viewing the careful and conscientious way that the students interact with each other. "She accepts everyone," Burr says. "She's taken people who can hardly walk."

When asked if she will pursue a higher degree of black belt, Burr hesitates only a minute. "Of course. I am only now considered a shodan (serious student). I am addicted to it," she says, "on a spiritual, physical and mental level. It's the most beautiful thing I have done in my life."

It's easy to see what she means. The methodical movements of this martial art look less like a fight than a tightly choreographed dance, and Burr's years of ballet training are evident in the grace and poise that outshines any mock aggressor she is paired up with.

At the end of class, as Mary struggles to take off her new accessory and the outward mark of her new title, a long black half-robe known as a hakama, her classmates begin rifling through the photos and clippings she has brought in. Again, as at the beginning of class, the murmuring begins. "You were on Broadway?" "Oh, Mary, look at you!" "Gorgeous." "You still have that body." Burr turns to a visitor, perplexed by the oohing and aahing around her.

"Look at me," she says, visibly confused. "You don't see yourself as old, you know?" In Burr's case, no one else does either.