

VIC LEROUX

A Force of Will

By Rudy Corrales

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Vic LeRoux is a Kenpo Grandmaster and a co-founder of the International Karate Connection Association (IKCA). He has been involved in the art since he was 13 years old, now at age 58, has been studying, teaching and promoting the art for approximately 44 years. In addition, he and IKCA Senior Grandmaster, Chuck Sullivan, developed the Karate Connection System of Kenpo Karate and the International Karate Connection Association back in 1990, after a combined 50-plus years in the art. Mr. LeRoux has made a teaching his vocation having managed Ed Parker's West Los Angeles Studio, owning the Karate Connection school, teaching children's outreach programs, and co-founding the Karate Connection Interactive Video Program.

Mr. LeRoux, when did you begin your martial arts training?

I started in 1964 when I talked my parents into allowing me to take Karate lessons. They took me to a Kenpo school just outside of Inglewood where we lived. That school was owned jointly by Ed Parker and Chuck Sullivan, with both men shared the teaching responsibilities so I received instruction from both.

What did you experience the first time you entered the studio?

My mom dropped me off at the school and left me with George Quinones, "Crazy George" as he was known in those days. He had a pitch black Fu Man Chu mustache and hair all over his body, which made him look like a gorilla. He was the basics instructor at the time. This was early in the game and at that time, there were no children's classes but fortunately I was big for my age and I was allowed to train with the adults. But you have to remember I was barely thirteen years old and Crazy George scared me half to death. I didn't think I was gonna make it out of there alive that first night. I thought about making a break for the door but I was afraid he might catch me so I just prayed I could make it through the class, and I did. Looking back, it's kind of funny but let me tell you it wasn't at the time.

The first lesson I learned that evening was to block, and twenty minutes after teaching and practicing the inward and outward blocks, George says to the class, as only George could, it was more of a snarl than a question, "Okay, so now you people know how to block, right?" Nobody had the guts to say, "No" so George started punching as hard as he could, stopping a quarter inch from our faces and we had to stop him, or at least he made us believe we did. Talk about intimidation! When my mom came to pick me up I was furious with he for leaving me there but I didn't say a word because I didn't want to look like a wimp and then I began thinking about what I had learned and somehow "Crazy George" didn't seem so crazy after all and I decided to go back and learn more. In time George became one of my best friends and taught me many things outside the art, but those are other stories for other times.

What made you want to take karate in the first place?

I could fight real well as a kid but deep down I realized that I didn't really know how to fight, if you get my meaning. I won the vast majority of my fights on guts and determination and because I lived in Inglewood, which was an up and coming rough and tumble place at that time I fought almost daily.

Looking back, I probably didn't need to fight as much as I thought I needed to, but I brought that mindset into the studio as well. And being that I was one of the youngest in the class it served me well, I was also bull-headed and didn't listen to anybody and disliked authority. My parents had trouble controlling me and so did the school I attended. I can credit Kenpo with a huge change in my life because not long after I started training, Chuck Sullivan, for whom I had great respect let me know in no uncertain terms that he would throw me out of the school if I didn't follow the rules and show respect to the instructors and my fellow students. However, at the same time he was caring, considerate and fair so I also found a role model and wanted to be as much like him as I could and I'd like to think I've succeeded in some ways. It's taken a lot of work because we are not at all alike, but it helps to have something to shoot for.

What was a typical class like back in those days?

Back in the sixties Kenpo karate was a lot simpler than what's taught today. Basically, we learned how to fight. Not just self-defense but how to actually get down, get it on, and be able to walk away unharmed. The complex terminology came later as Mr. Parker tried to sophisticate the Art. Back then it was, "Kick him twice and then punch his lights out". Simple but direct and a lot more technical than it might sound when you first hear it. Kick him twice, but what kind of kicks? Roundhouse - snapping ball kicks - thrust kicks - heel kicks - hooking kicks - scoop kicks - knife-edge kicks or a combination? And to what targets? Head - ribs - kidneys - solar plexus - groin - thigh - shin - instep, or again, a combination? And as to "Punch his lights out" - I won't even get into that here. And from what blend of principles do you generate your power and what methods do you use to get your penetration? We were technical all right, but not so technical that we would spend half and class defining the difference between paths of entry as opposed to lines of entry. Who cares as long as you get there?

But a typical class began with a rigorous five-minute warm-up that was followed by twenty-five minutes of basics drills. A half-hour into the class, if your gi wasn't drenched with sweat, you weren't participating. The rest of the class was spent going over new material, and running technique lines, and it always ended with sparring. Sparring was an important part of the class in those days because it's the only truly spontaneous training we got. No theory here, just get-down and thump. Those who stayed got consistently stronger, faster and better, and we proudly and respectfully believed that we could hold our own against anyone, anytime, anywhere.

How did you get into teaching Kenpo?

I had enlisted in the National Guard and was stationed at Camp Roberts. This was right after I graduated from high school. I tried college for a while but it wasn't for me and I lost my deferment. After enlisting and spending six months on active duty. I returned home. I immediately went back to studying because I had made up my mind while I was in the military to make martial arts my career. At the time I was still a brown belt. Unfortunately, my training was short lived because the school Mr. Sullivan and Mr. Parker had in Inglewood closed. However, right around this time Steve Sanders (later to become Steve Muhammad) and some others opened the Black Karate Federation (BKF) School. It was convenient to Inglewood where I was living plus I knew and had trained alongside Mr. Sanders (Muhammad) for some years. It was with the BKF that I was promoted to First Degree Black Belt under Mr. Sanders (Muhammad). I subsequently trained with the BKF for three years and am considered a Charter Member of that organization. Two weeks after being promoted by Mr. Sanders I went to Ed Parker's Santa Monica school and was promoted to First Degree Black Belt by Mr. Parker. In late 1970, I was routinely working out at the West Los Angeles School in the Tuesday night advanced class that focused mainly on sparring. Mr. Parker asked me one night after class if I would like to manage the school. I didn't have to ponder that very long, I told him "Yes" and he handed me the keys. I managed the West LA school for four years.

How did managing the West LA studio help in the development of your Kenpo?

The four years that I managed the school was to be one of the most explosive learning periods of my Kenpo journey. It was during this time that Ed Parker's Kenpo underwent a change in curriculum: The new teaching manuals were created, a high volume of new terminology, creeds, sets, and names of the techniques were developed. As manager of the school, and instructor of all the private classes, it was imperative that I learn all of the material: forward, backwards, and sideways. As a bonus I received, as part of my salary, private lessons from Mr. Parker. This lasted four years. It was one of the most exciting times I've had in the art, and being able to work so closely with Mr. Parker did great things for my Kenpo. He was able to show me things, because of our one-on-one relationship, that he didn't necessarily teach in the classes. By that time Mr. Parker had all but quit teaching private lessons, so it was an extraordinary opportunity for me.

What did you do afterwards?

I became a karate vagabond: I trained everywhere and anywhere, the West Los Angeles School, the Pasadena school, Eddie Booze's studio in Long Beach, and the BKF School in South Central Los Angeles. In 1980 I decided to open the Karate Connection School in Hawthorne, California with Chuck Sullivan as the head instructor.

Have you studied any arts other than Kenpo, if so, with whom?

I trained in Jeet Kune Do with Danny Inosanto, and Ted Lucay who was his main man at the time. I worked my way into the intermediate class. I also trained privately with Jerry Poteet. In fact, even though he wasn't looking for students at the time he approached me after one class. He told me that he liked my attitude, and thought I would fit right in with his material. I also trained a little with Larry Hartsell.

Since you cross-trained in other arts, how have you been influenced by that?

I feel it's very important to cross train, especially in today's martial arts environment. But, and this most important: you must have a solid base. I can't emphasize that statement enough! To me that base has to be an unyielding and complete stand-up fighting system, not some linear one-step system; not something that relies solely on the legs, which become less and less functional as you advance in age; not some Art that goes to the ground and stays on the ground; not some Art that's all about what you're going to do to him while you're in a straight-on stance that leaves your centerline open and invites attacks to your groin and other vital areas; and not some system that's all theory and terminology, which leads to talking a great fight but getting your butt kicked. No, what you need is a system that not only teaches self defense but fighting skills as well.

Being the co-head of an international martial arts organization, I also have had the opportunity to exchange ideas with many people from other arts, styles or systems who have come to the Karate Connection, adopting it as their base system. They bring a wealth of information with them from their earlier choice and we have been able to capitalize upon their backgrounds and training. At our annual seminar in Long Beach, California we take advantage of those who have chosen to become our brothers to teach our people their original arts or the portions of their arts that fit and blend with our Kenpo.

We also encourage our Black Belts to go out and learn whatever they can that will intermingle with our Kenpo and they have done so. They've brought what they've learned back home to the Karate Connection Brotherhood and now share it with our people. I don't think you'll find that in many other organizations. I've witnessed, from personally being involved, other systems being very closed and withdrawn from the rest of the martial arts community. Their attitude seems to be that they don't want their students to see what others are doing. Why do you suppose that is? Could be that they are afraid they'll see something better? What a shame. Open your eyes and your mind to what's out there. You might be surprised as to what you'll find, but as I stated in the very beginning, make sure you've got what solid base to build on. To quote Mr. Parker, "Without a solid foundation to build on it's like trying to construct a skyscraper on sand. Ain't gonna work Brudda".