



KAZOKU

Trailblazers

By Jerry Figgiani

One evening, teaching in my dojo, I was speaking to the class about the history of Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu. After the class ended, I was called over to the gallery by one of the parents to ask me a question. He asked why I chose this particular style of karate to train in. He told me that he googled the system and couldn't believe how rich and deep the history was. I told him that when I originally started I actually had no idea what system I was studying. I just thought I was learning Karate, not necessarily a specific style. What also was impressive to this parent was the fact that Matsubayashi could be traced back to Okinawa, the birthplace of karate. As an instructor, I feel very blessed and proud to be a part of this authentic style of martial arts and further, to be able to pass on this wonderful history and culture to my many students throughout the years

In this Trailblazer column, I will introduce one of the great pioneers of our system, that I believe we all owe a great deal of gratitude to; James K. Wax, the first American Black Belt in Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu. Sensei Mike George, another pioneer in the Matsubayashi lineage, stated "The genesis of Matsubayashi began when a young, returning American Marine, James Wax, the father of American Matsubayashi, began teaching in Dayton Ohio." Ted Wax, one of the sons of James Wax, said "My dad would always practice with Ansei Ueshiro, who was the first Okinawan sent from the Nagamine dojo to the United States." What most karateka fail to realize is that James Wax actually sponsored Ueshiro Sensei so that he could come to the United States. Shortly after that Matsubayashi began to spread from Ohio to New York and then throughout the world becoming one of the most universally practiced styles of karate today.

During one of his many visits to my dojo, Soke Takayoshi Nagamine, son of the Grand Master, Shoshin Nagamine, told me that due to James Wax establishing Matsubayashi dojos strategically throughout Ohio and New York, his ability to maintain a presence in the United States was made possible. Although I have never met Sensei Jams Wax, I hold a deep appreciation for him because his actions had a direct and lasting effect on my path as a martial artist.

In 2015 I hosted an All Matsubayashi Weekend at my Long Island dojo, East Coast Black Belt Academy which was packed with practitioners from all affiliations in the Matsubayashi system. One of the many highlights of the weekend was presenting a Lifetime Achievement Award to Reggie Wax on behalf of his father James. Reggie drove over 10 hours from Ohio so that he could receive this presentation and felt so strongly about all the various practitioners coming together in unity that he wore one of his father's old Gis out of respect and admiration for what was being accomplished. In spite of the many different tributaries that branch off the original Matsubayashi system, Reggie's participation illustrated that regardless of our various affiliations we are all one family under the Matsubayashi system.

In closing, after teaching Matsubayashi for more than 33 years, I strongly believe that James K. Wax Sensei has had a profound impact on not only my life, but the lives of thousands of Matsubayashi practitioners, most of who never met him and many of who are learning about him for the first time here. This is a clear demonstration of how important it is to understand the history and lineage of our style and even more so to understand the meaning of Sensei as the one that has come before. Thank you, James K. Wax for your many contributions to Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu. 🐉

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James Wax



Ansei Ueshiro and James Wax



Reggie Wax and Jerry Figgiani

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