

PANEL DISCUSSION RECAP: HOW TO KEEP YOUNG ADULTS (19-29 yrs) ENGAGED IN AIKIDO

The beginning of something bigger is the best way to describe the panel discussion we held on Monday June 26 at this year's summer camp in Calgary.

Discussions like these break the ice. They nurture an openness to different perspectives and debunk the myth that knowledge and wisdom are reserved for a select few.



Moderated by Anita Abbasi (CAF member-at-large), the panel discussion brought together four CAF members of varying ages, experiences and stages in their Aikido career: Maya Hanevy (19 years-old, 4th kyu at BigRock Aikikai), Gurneet Singh (26 years-old, 4th kyu at JCCC Aikikai), Esteban Ricalde (42 years-old, 4th Dan at Avalon Aikikai) and Martin Moreau sensei (50 years-old, 4th Dan, chief instructor at Rock Water Aikikai).

The topic to be dissected was an elusive one for a lot of dojos across Canada: “How to keep young adults (19-29 years-old) engaged in Aikido?”

Whereas a few key dojos in our community — notably BigRock Aikikai, Aikidaily International Academy and Rock Water Aikikai — have tried-and-true programs that foster a love of Aikido from a young age, growing with them into early adulthood, the fact remains there is significant gap between the young adults that were brought into Aikido in the mid-2000s and the generation of young adults just starting now. The goal of this discussion was not to

provide a fast solution to a complex issue. The goal was to do what we often do in Aikido: return to centre. That is, remind ourselves what Aikido offers, what makes a safe and inviting dojo and how instrumental the dojo-cho as well as current dojo members are in keeping students engaged and welcomed.

Here's a recap of the key points and responses from the panelists:

Maya:

- Her approach to Aikido has evolved as she transitioned from being a kid to a young adult. Previously, it was an activity her parents brought her to, but now she has to make time for it amidst a busy schedule, often requiring sacrifices.
- The support and understanding from her dojo, BigRock Aikikai, have been crucial in striking a balance between Aikido and other commitments like school and work. Steve Sensei's advice to try her best and the supportive Aikido community have given her peace of mind when she can't attend practice regularly due to school.
- Though Maya doesn't teach young adults, she co-instructs preschool classes at BigRock Aikikai. Having a class to take responsibility for has helped her stay interested in Aikido. She has learned to adapt to students' needs as a teacher and realizes that each student responds to learning differently.
- To improve the inviting and safe environment in dojos, Maya suggests encouraging the dojo to be a stress-free space where students can solely focus on practice. Building a supportive and accepting community within the dojo, where newcomers are warmly welcomed and friendships are formed, would lead to more young adults staying in Aikido.
- Maya is inspired by the support and patience shown by her sempai (senior students) and aims to replicate that when interacting with new young adult students, providing them with the same supportive atmosphere she experienced.

Gurneet:

- Gurneet discovered Aikido through a holistic program and was drawn to its self-development and spiritual aspects.
- Success in engagement was achieved when instructors tailored classes to accommodate the group's limits and revisited basics to support struggling students.
- To improve the dojo's inviting and safe atmosphere, senior advanced students played a crucial role in helping new students feel included and cared for.
- Gurneet emphasized the importance of physical training in Aikido and hopes to help others through hands-on practice.

Esteban:

- Aikido was a meaningful pursuit for Esteban since his teenage years and remained attractive due to the strong community bond.

- The dojo's supportive community brought him back whenever life events caused breaks in his practice.

- Engaging young adult students was exemplified through an activity (everyone was tasked to do 200 rolls in one hour) that promoted trust, body dynamics, and active meditation.

- Creating a safe and inclusive dojo involves building a healthy community around it, organizing events, and connecting with students on a personal level.

Martin:

- Martin was drawn to Aikido's non-aggressive and non-competitive nature after trying various martial arts.

- Social activities and a sense of belonging kept him engaged, making the dojo more than just a place to work out.

- Vigorous and challenging practice facilitated by younger instructors appealed to him as a young adult.

- He stressed the importance of having instructors closer in age to young adult students, fostering a stronger connection and compatibility in training.**

***This point also came up in the Kids & Youth Class Demo & Workshop!*

Overall, the panelists highlighted the significance of a warm and supportive community in Aikido, which encourages young adults to remain dedicated to their practice. Engaging teaching methods, physical practice, and a relatable age gap between students and instructors were seen as essential elements in creating a safe, inclusive, and inviting dojo environment. By embracing these aspects, Aikido dojos can continue to attract and retain young adult practitioners, fostering growth and development within the art and among its practitioners. Their full answers can be found below.

Please note that because this session was not recorded, the moderator and panelists had to pull from their memories the main points that came up during the discussion. In the future, we will make arrangements to record audio and offer an authentic transcript of our panel discussions as well as the audio recording of the discussion itself. This was our first go at alternative, extracurricular programming during our summer camp event and we weren't sure how it would be received. This recap was created upon request of those in attendance. It offers but a snapshot of the rich conversation that transpired on June 26, 2023. Thank you all for your interest and support. This won't be the last of its kind and we will be better equipped to respond to the documenting needs of our membership and event attendees.

MAYA

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How To Keep Young Adults (19-29 yrs) Engaged in Aikido?

the Panelists

Maya Hanevy
4th Kyu, BigRock Aikikai (AB)

Maya is a student at BigRock Aikikai, who began Aikido at 8 years old. She is 19 years old and is currently studying at the Training Division Fire Academy based out of Texas. She is a co-instructor of BigRock Aikikai's preschool classes and is a 4th kyu.

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How has your Aikido or your approach to your practice changed now on the cusp of your 20s from when you were a kid?

My approach to aikido has changed quite a bit from when I was a kid. The biggest change is that aikido used to be something that my parents brought me to every week and I saw my friends, I learned, and then they'd bring me back the next week and I wouldn't really have to think about it. As an adult, it's now something I have to make time for in my busy schedule, and quite often other things get sacrificed in order to do so. It can be a hard sacrifice to make which is why I think there is such a lack of young adults practicing regularly.

So we know that this age range is a time of growth, uncertainty and finding your identity. Adding an extracurricular activity to school, to work and/or to relationships isn't as straightforward as one would think. How were or are some ways that you were able to fit Aikido into your schedule and did your dojo help facilitate striking that balance?

By planning EVERYTHING. Between work, school, and my personal life, it can be incredibly hard to make time for practice. Everyone at BigRock Aikikai has been super supportive and understanding of my dedication to school and the fact that I won't always be able to make it to every practice. When I first started university I had a conversation with Steve Sensei about trying to keep up with both school and regular practice. His advice to me was simply to try my best. I strongly believe that the support I received from Steve Sensei and the Aikido community has helped give me peace of mind when I am unable to attend practice regularly.

Teaching is a lot about adapting to your students; we're often tailoring the class to that group. Can you share one or two instance — whether you as a student or you as

an instructor — where you saw or felt success in how engaged you were or young adult students were in the class?

Teaching is all about adapting to students needs, while I do not teach young adults I am co-instructor of BigRock Aikikai's preschool classes along with Alex (Tsvik, also of BigRock Aikikai). Having a class that I have a responsibility to has definitely helped me stay interested in Aikido. As time goes on, even if I feel like I'm starting to not practice regularly or I can feel myself going into a slump, the preschool classes every week give me inspiration and allow me to spend time at the dojo outside of practice. As a teacher it is all about adapting to students' needs and providing flexibility and support for them. I've learned that each students is quite different and responds to learning in different ways.

In your travels or observations of your own dojos or dojos you have visited, what are some ways we can improve on how inviting or how safe our dojos would be for anybody, but particularly young adults?

The dojo can be a place where you can forget about the stresses of everyday life and focus solely on practice. It can be a safe space for students, and I think that encouraging this would lead to more young adults staying in Aikido. Other than the BigRock Aikikai dojo and Cardel (dojo), I have only been to one other dojo in Vancouver for a seminar. That seminar was amazing and I saw how the young adults interacted with each other in such an accepting and supportive way. I think that this is key to the success of young adults in the dojo, ensuring that everyone takes newcomers under their wing and treats each other with support and kindness. The truth is that when it comes to young adults, friendships are an important part of our lives, creating close friendships in Aikido definitely strengthens the possibility of more frequent practice

What was something your dojo-cho or sempai or even kohai did that you have tried to replicate with new young adult students?

I'd say that the support and the patience that my sempai have shown towards me have been one of the most inspiring efforts and I would like to replicate that when it comes to new students.

GURNEET

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the Panelists

Gurneet Singh
4th Kyu, JCCC Aikikai (ON)

Gurneet is 26 years old and has been practicing Aikido in Toronto at JCCC Aikikai for five years. Her rank is 4th kyu. She is in her second year of studying Sustainable Environmental Management at York University, and she is passionate about Aikido and spirituality.

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How did you find Aikido and what keeps you interested?

I found Aikido through a holistic program. My instructor for the Shiatsu course practiced Aikido and mentioned it in passing during class. A year after the program, I was looking for a hobby and something meaningful to devote my time to, so I reached out to him and have been practicing Aikido ever since! I am interested in self-development and spirituality and find that Aikido helps me grow and, most importantly, with others.

Teaching is a lot about adapting to your students; we're often tailoring the class to that group. Can you share one or two instances — whether you as a student or you as an instructor — where you saw or felt success in how engaged you were or young adult students were in the class?

The instructors at my dojo are very considerate of the limits of myself and my peers in the dojo. They gauge our limits and adjust the intensity or content based on who is present. If the class is ever struggling, the instructors will revisit basics to help us better grasp more complex techniques.

In your travels or observations of your own dojos or dojos you have visited, what are some ways we can improve on how inviting or how safe our dojos would be for anybody, but particularly young adults?

I think the senior advanced students are vital to creating an inviting and safe atmosphere. Entering a new dojo and learning something new is overwhelming, but having someone open to answering questions and guiding me through the dojo etiquette helped me to feel included, safe, and cared for.

What was something your dojo-cho or sempai or even kohai did that you have tried to replicate with new young adult students?

I was nervous about the front roll when I started at JCCC Aikikai. No matter how much it was explained, I had trouble trusting myself to roll. One of the senior students kept making me do the front roll without having too much time to think about it, and eventually, I became more comfortable and relaxed. I appreciated this because the explanations were less important than the practice of continuously doing the movement. I hope I can help other young adults, and new students in general, learn through physical training, as I know how difficult it can be to grasp Aikido through words.

ESTEBAN

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Esteban Ricalde
3rd Dan, Avalon Aikikai (NFLD)

Esteban is a third dan Aikido practitioner currently training/teaching at Avalon Aikikai in St. John's, Newfoundland. He started practicing as a teenager in 1993 at Kobukan Xalapa in Mexico. His main influences are Emiliano Perez, Kurita Shihan, Marta Fernandez, Kawahara Shihan, Shin Chin, Ivan Booth, Nakamura Shihan and Osawa Shihan.

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What did Aikido mean to you in your 20s - what kept you going?

- I started practicing when I was 12 after trying several other martial arts and sports
- By the time I was 20, I was sure that Aikido was something I really enjoyed and would keep practicing for a long time

How were or are some ways that you were able to fit Aikido into your schedule and did your dojo help facilitate striking that balance?

- Early adulthood is always full of changes and schedule conflicts
- During my 20s, I wasn't able to practice for a couple of years because of school or stress
- My hometown dojo had a really closed knitted community
- The community was what brought me back whenever I stopped practicing

Can you share one or two instances — whether you as a student or you as an instructor — where you saw or felt success in how engaged you were or young adult students were in the class?

- As student, I clearly remember one particular class full of young adults (including myself)
- The instructor asked us to do 200 rolls for the class (1 hour)
- Everybody keep track of their own work and decided when to do breaks and for how long
- No warmup, no technique and nobody tracking you. Just 200 rolls
- For me, it was a really engaging activity
- Taught me about trust, body dynamics, identifying my limits and defining my own phase
- It was my first experience with active meditation

What are some ways we can improve on how inviting or how safe our dojos would be for anybody, but particularly young adults?

- Building a strong and accepting community around the Dojo is key
- As a non-competitive martial art, Aikido allows to build a healthier community than other martial arts
- Community goes beyond the classes, it requires organizing events and connecting with students

What was something your dojo-cho or sempai or even kohai did that you have tried to replicate with new young adult students?

- At my current dojo, we never know who is going to attend each class because we have several time-slots during the week
- As dojo-cho, Ivan is really good at re-structuring his class depending on who shows up
- He adjusts the class to the students on the mats and tries to do techniques and activities that are fun and meaningful to them
- I try to do the same
- Even when I have a plan on what I want to cover in a session, I normally adjust/redefine after the warmup depending on who is on the mats

What does a safe/inclusive dojo look like to you?

- A space that promotes a positive, supportive and open training environment in which all members have equal opportunity to participate and progress in their Aikido regardless of race, ethnic or religious background, gender, sexual orientation, national origin, age, disability or any other factor
- Injuries should not be a regular issue and all the members should take care of each other

MARTIN

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Martin Moreau
4th Dan, Chief Instructor - Rock Water Aikikai (BC)

Martin Moreau has been training in Aikido for 29 years, and teaching kids, teens and young adults for over 22 years. His dojo, Rock Water Aikikai, is dedicated to young people under 30. His personal mission is to grow the next generation of young Aikido leaders.

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I joined Aikido when I was 21 years old, after trying 11 different martial arts. I had been gang bullied at school and wanted to join a martial art initially with the intent of learning to defend myself. I chose Aikido because it was the only one that was non-aggressive and non-competitive. Also, the people at the dojo made me feel very welcome, were very friendly and non threatening in their approach and demeanor.

What kept me going in my younger years, beyond the desire to learn self defense, and despite my very busy life as a young adult (with Work, Post Secondary Education, relationships, etc) was primarily the following factors:

- There was lots of socializing before and after class, and there were social events. It was not just a place to go workout or get a sweat and leave.
- The dojo gave me a feeling of belonging, and a sense of community. People checked in on me when I missed several classes due to life events, which made me feel like they cared about me.
- Practice was rigorous, energetic and demanding back then, because the teachers were younger and manifesting that in their teaching. This was enticing for me as a young adult in my 20's.
- Due to the younger age of the instructors, I could relate to them well and look up to them as big brother or father/mother figures, because they were within 10-20 years of my age, versus the current norm which is that our teachers are 30-50 years older than young adults coming in. It is quite difficult for 20 year olds to relate to 40-70 year old teachers, so the connection is going to be much more difficult, and the training environment in classes where the teachers is over 50 is usually not as compatible with what a young adult is looking for.