

# The Pure Heart of Kinei Nakasone



By James DeKenipp

All photos courtesy of M. Labbate.

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*The following interview is dedicated to the loving memory of Nakasone Kinei. A gentleman with a pure heart in every sense of the word.*

## **Introduction**

The Okinawan people have long accepted the responsibility for ensuring Karate's survival in the modern world. And while many people would debate that Karate's practicality has diminished with the development of modern weaponry, any Okinawan would tell you that you missed the real lessons of Karate. Spearheading this responsibility is Nakasone Kinei (10<sup>th</sup> Dan).

Realizing that this task is bigger than any one individual, in 1996 Nakasone Sensei formed the Okinawan Goju Ryu Seibukai. With dojo's (training halls) located throughout the

world, the Seibukai or “Pure Heart” Association is dedicated to the preservation and study of traditional Okinawan Goju Ryu Karate Do. The Seibukai’s mission is simple: promote the growth of Goju Ryu around the world.

Unfortunately, Nakasone Sensei only realized part of his dream. On December 21, 2002, Nakasone Sensei passed away at his childhood home at the age of 66. He is survived by his wife Nakasone Sadako and 5 children: daughters Sanchiyo, Hatsuko, Kinuyo, Eiko, and his son Tsuyoshi. He also had the opportunity to see three grandchildren; granddaughters Natsuko and Kanako, and grandson Kaishu.

In the following interview, Sensei Marvin Labbate (8<sup>th</sup> Dan), a student and close personal friend of Nakasone Sensei, talks about the life of this "old school" Karate Do master.

## **Interview**

*JD: Sensei Labbate, I would like to begin by thanking you for this interview and the opportunity to learn more about the life of Nakasone Sensei, firsthand. I know, from previous conversations with you, that you have known Nakasone Sensei for almost twenty years. Can you tell us when and how you first met Nakasone Sensei?*

*SL: Sensei and I first met in 1984 when I went to Okinawa with Frank Van Lenten. Sensei was a member of the Shobukan at the time and Van Lenten Shihan was the head of the Goshin Do Karate Do Kyokai. Shihan arranged a good will trip to visit the Shobukan Honbu for about twenty-five black belts from the different schools in his organization. I trained under Peter Musacchio who was a student of and owned a school under Van Lenten Shihan.*

*JD: Did Sensei have his own dojo at the time?*

*SL: Yes but I didn't get to visit it. Being that this was my first time on Okinawa and I was only a 3<sup>rd</sup> Dan, most of my time was spent on the dojo floor training. However, Sensei owned a restaurant in Okinawa City that we had dinner at one night.*

*JD: How did your relationship with Sensei begin to develop?*

*SL: After that first trip in 1984, I didn't meet him again until 1992 when I went to Okinawa for the Shobukan 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary. This visit brought other Shobukan dojo from around the world to celebrate.*



Labbate Sensei visiting Okinawa in 1992.

*After the celebrations ended and everyone had left, I stayed for an additional week of training. During this week, Nakasone Sensei came to the dojo everyday to personally train me. He would show up at around Noon and we would train for about 3 hours.*

*JD: So you hadn't seen him in almost eight years and on your next trip to Okinawa he is personally training you. Why?*

*SL: Even at this time I didn't know him real well. My relationship was still just forming with him. I was a member of Shobukan and had developed a relationship with Shinjo Masanobu, the head of the Shobukan. I think that the other seniors in the Shobukan saw the relationship that I had with Shinjo Sensei and that opened the door to a relationship with them as well.*

*JD: So your relationship with Nakasone Sensei formed because of Shinjo Sensei?*

*SL: Well, yes. Sort of. See, on Okinawa, Karate is all about developing personal relationships. To the Okinawan master's, what's in your heart and mind is more important than your Karate technique. On my first visit, I was just introduced to the Okinawan's. And even though they worked us pretty hard, they weren't so concerned about my technique. They wanted to know what was in my heart. Then in 1987, I invited Shinjo Sensei to my dojo in Syracuse, New York. This visit was pivotal in cementing my relationship with Okinawa to the point that when I went to Okinawa in 1992, I began to develop relationships with the other seniors.*

*JD: What happened next?*

*SL: Well, then in 1993, Shinjo Sensei passed away and Nakasone Sensei became the head of Shobukan. Now I had focus on my relationship with Nakasone Sensei. About a year later, I invited Nakasone Sensei and other Shobukan seniors to my dojo, for training and sightseeing. As it so happened, it was during this visit that our relationship started to become more personal. For example, rather than letting him stay in a hotel I welcomed him into in my home. I really wanted to develop our relationship and figured what better way to get to know someone than invite him in and make him one of the family. I wanted him to experience the American culture and get to know me on a personal level. I didn't want him to just see my Karate, I wanted to see the whole picture of me. As a Christian, as a husband, and as a father.*

*JD: Aside from the more traditional teacher-student relationship, I know that you had a close personal relationship with Sensei. Can you give us some insight into that relationship and the impact that it has on you today?*

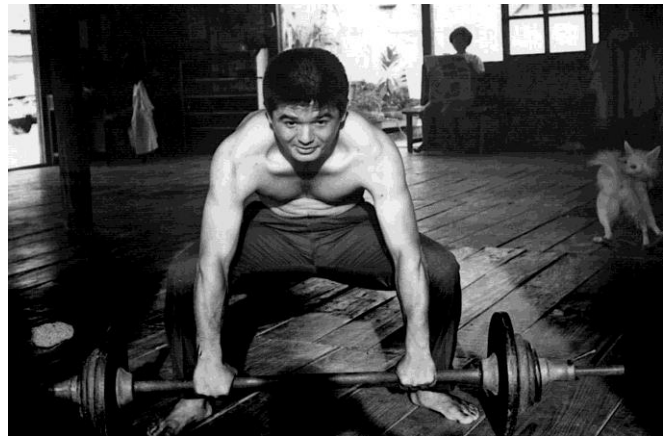
*SL:* As our relationship grew, it became more of a father and son relationship. Although you never really lose that teacher-student relationship, ours became more intimate. He began to reveal personal things about himself, his family, his training. I really came to know about his life outside of Karate. The real Nakasone Sensei was a kind, caring, sensitive person. In the world of Sensei's today, he was a Sensei you could follow. As a result of this, although I had tremendous respect for his martial arts, I had even greater respect for him as a person.



Nakasone Sensei and Labbate Sensei relaxing after dinner during Sensei's visit to United States in 1998.

*JD:* Can you tell us about Sensei's training as a young man. When and where Sensei started training? What was the training like?

*SL:* Sensei started training in 1956 when he was around twenty years old. His first teacher was Toguchi Seikichi, a senior student of Miyagi Chojun, the founder of Goju Ryu Karate Do. Initially, the training was pretty severe by today's standards. His first year of training consisted of



Nakasone Sensei as a young man doing Hojo Undo.

Sanchin Kata, Hojo Undo (supplementary training), and Kihon (Basics). Classes would last on average of 4 to 6 hours every day. Sometimes it would even stretch out to 8 hours. After the first year, the training schedule expanded to include Junbi Undo (warm-up exercises), Kegū Undo (weight training), Kata (forms), and Kaisai Kumite (prearranged sparring).

*JD: Did Toguchi Sensei personally teach these classes?*

*SL:* Yes, but not the way classes are taught in dojo's today. Back then, junior students would watch and copy the senior students moves. They would start with stances and how to transition from stance to stance. Then they would move on to basic techniques: blocks, punches, and kicks. After basics they would do kata or kumite. During training, Toguchi Sensei would walk around and correct everyone's techniques. This was the way that students learned Karate back then. This was the way that Toguchi Sensei learned from Miyagi Sensei.

*JD: What was Sensei's favorite part of the training?*

*SL:* Definitely Kumite. Actually, he really enjoyed all aspects of training. He particularly liked the kata Seiunchin, which is a Goju Ryu grappling kata. He once told me that Seiunchin was his favorite because "I have short legs and can do a really good Shiko Dachi (Sumo Stance)." What he enjoyed the most though was kumite.

*JD: Did he ever train with any other senior students of Miyagi Sensei?*

*SL:* I believe that Toguchi Sensei was his only instructor. I know that he trained and had friendships with other Okinawan martial artists. However, he never mentioned that he had any other instructor's to me.

*JD: When and where did Sensei first start teaching Karate?*

*SL:* As Nakasone Sensei continued to train, he became one of Toguchi Sensei's senior students and thus would help with the instruction of the junior students. However, in 1965, Sensei was given permission by Toguchi Sensei to open the first Shorikan Branch Dojo in Kin Village.



Nakasone Sensei relaxing after class with other students.

*JD: Did he continue to train under Toguchi Sensei after opening his own dojo?*

*SL:* For a while. Toguchi Sensei would occasionally visit his dojo to teach classes. Then in 1975 he opened a second dojo in his hometown, Goya Village. By this time though he no longer trained under Toguchi Sensei due to the fact that Toguchi Sensei moved to Tokyo.

*JD: Are these dojo's still open today?*

*SL:* No. By 1980, both dojo's were closed due to a bad economy at the time. Then in 1981, he joined the Shobukan under Shinjo Sensei who was his childhood friend since grade school. They were also training partner under Toguchi Sensei. That same year he opened a Shobukan Branch Dojo in Goya Village.

*JD: How long was he a member of the Shobukan?*

*SL:* He remained a senior Kancho in the Shobukan until the death of Shinjo Sensei in 1993. After Shinjo Sensei passed away, Nakasone Sensei assumed the post of Head Kancho of the Shobukan until founding the Okinawan Goju Ryu Seibukai in 1996.

*JD: What motivated Sensei to form the Seibukai?*

*SL:* After Shinjo Sensei passed away, political turmoil erupted within the Shobukan. Also according to Okinawan custom, Shinjo Sensei's wife inherited the organization. So even though he was the head Kancho of the Shobukan, it was in title only. He felt that the organization couldn't go any further in its goals. So



The first Seibukai Dojo.

when Sensei resigned from Shobukan, other senior left with him and asked him to form his own organization. At first he was reluctant but because of his love for martial arts and his relationships with these other students he decided to form the Seibukai. However, he wanted an organization that would out live him. To do this, he created a safety mechanism to ensure that the Seibukai went on without any of the politics that typically follows the death of a Kaisha. He had already named his successor which was his first student, Gushikin Shitoku.

*JD: As the International Representative for the Okinawan Goju Ryu Seibukai, what is your roll in preserving and promoting Goju Ryu throughout the world?*

*SL:* Seibukai's goal is to preserve Okinawan's cultural treasure by promoting Okinawan Goju Ryu Karate Do around the world.

In order to do this, we need to develop friendships and personal relationships with other individuals and organizations that have this same goal. My personal responsibility in accomplishing this goal is to lead by example. I need to continue to train and research in areas of history, philosophy, culture, and etiquette, and training concepts and principles to not only preserve Goju Ryu but ensure future generations receive better Goju Ryu Karate Do than I did.



Nakasone Sensei teaching Labbate Sensei.

*JD:* How has Sensei's affected the rest of the Seibukai leadership?

*SL:* Of course this is a sorrowful time. Traditionally, the Okinawan people mourn the passing of a loved one for about a year. The death of any organizations founder creates a fragile existence in the organization hierarchy. But all of the Seibukai leadership are dedicated to the same principles that Nakasone Sensei founded the Seibukai on. In order to maintain order and structure in the Seibukai, the founding board



Gushikin Shitoku

members reassigned duties according the Nakasone Sensei's wishes. Gushikin Shitoku has assumed the post of Kaicho of the Seibukai. Gushikin Sensei was Nakasone Sensei's first student from his Kin Village school and a Senior Kancho in the Seibukai.

*JD: What was Nakasone Sensei's dream for the Seibukai?*

*SL:* To see the Okinawan Goju Ryu Seibukai recognized internationally as one of the premier Goju Ryu Karate Do organizations. While most traditional organizations today can boast roots and credentials to Okinawa, he wanted the Seibukai to be recognized for more than affiliations. He wanted the Seibukai to be known for preserving the art in its entirety. This includes the history, philosophy, culture, etiquette, and science of Goju Ryu.

*JD: What is your most memorable experience of Nakasone Sensei?*

*SL:* My last trip to Okinawa I took 8 instructors including my son. Sensei drove us to a secluded beach where we did falling drills and kumite sets.



Training on the beach in Okinawa.

We also had an opportunity to visit a second dojo that Sensei was building in his back yard. It was what he called a “Teachers College” and would have been reserved for teaching 4<sup>th</sup> Dan and above. Finally, we planted a tree together in the yard of the dojo to symbolize a strength of unity and growth. We are his American family and we will miss him greatly.



Planting a tree together.



His American Family.

*JD: What do you consider Nakasone Sensei’s most valuable teaching?*

Karate is more than just physical technique, Karate is a matter of the heart. He taught me that its what is in a persons heart that matters.