

Legendary Bay Area Martial Arts Pioneering Grandmasters Honor Ernie Reyes, Sr. at his 60th Birthday Celebration

By Sid Campbell

And Edited by KJN Ernie Reyes

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Remember at 60 years old you can still be in incredible shape! It all about mind set! I would like to give my deepest appreciation to Grand Master Sid Campbell for writing this Masterful Article. The extraordinary thing is, he gave me a copy a day after my birthday and association's historical celebration. Grand Master Campbell obviously has a photographic memory since he didn't take any notes that night but was remarkably able to recapture each event, experience, and remember the names of political leaders, celebrities that send their best wishes on video, instructors past and present that he didn't even know. It is amazing how he could give us a precise, exact, and an accurate visualization of our martial art gala through the use of words. It is a gift from Grand Master Campbell to us to keep as part of our legacy and history.

Having Master Campbell spend his time and energy to write this article is old school ways of traditional martial arts custom. Giving his heart and soul without being told. This is something we can all learn from. KJN Ernie Reyes

*Grand Master Campbell is definitely a brilliant Martial Artist, Author of *The Tiger and Dragon*, which tells of the training days with Bruce Lee, and *Weapons of the South Pacific*, and an accomplished painter*

Turning back the hands of time seemed like an easy task for Tae Kwon Do Master Ernie Reyes, Sr. as he celebrated his 60th birthday with family, students and friends who attended his extravagant fete hosted at the Santa Clara Convention Center on the beautiful evening of February 16, 2007.

It was literally an affair that had been six-decades in the making and surely one that was assuredly to be a remarkable high point in his life. In total, there were over 600 well-wishers, many bearing birthday gifts, that had come to honor him on this special evening and to also share in the success of celebrating the 30 years of phenomenal growth of Master Reyes' and Tony Thompson's West Coast World Martial Arts Association.

Also, among the renowned leaders and legends of the martial arts world in attendance to celebrate and pay honor to master Reyes's on this momentous occasion were Great Grandmaster Wally Jay, Great Grandmaster Ralph Castro, Great Grandmaster Al Novak, Great Grandmaster Charles Gaylord, Grandmaster Sid Campbell and Master Mark Gerry. Accompanying them as VIP's were Mrs. Bernice Jay, Mrs. Pat Castro, Ms Barbara Lough and Ms Annie Shear.

Within the World West Coast Association, its organization of affiliated branch schools guest list read like a virtual "Who's Who" of black belt instructors, past and present students and demo team members that had gathered for this extraordinary reunion.

This distinguished old school demo team cadre in attendance included Scott Coker, Gary Nakahma, Margie Betke, Chuckie "Quick Kick" Curry, then Ernie Reyes Jr., Kim Do and Lee Reyes as well as many of the local and regional West Coast Association's instructors that had made a name for themselves professionally in the world of martial arts like Tom Callos.

Master Reyes would also like to take time to give thanks to George Chung and Chynthia Rothrock, Belinda Davis, Allison Baker, Dayton and Darren Pang who were also part of the dynamic first generation of demo team stars who impacted the martial art world.

Also coming to celebrate and honor this special moment in time were the leaders of our Association 2007. KJN's Margie Betke, Gary Nakahama, Greg Fears, Diane Murray, Joey Febres, Russ Rocchi, Hector Rodriguez, Sandy Betke, David Hughes, Donna Bernardi, Kevin Ruby, Jerry Ware, Teri Lee, Ricky Jones, Bill Guardino, David Medina, Joe Soltis, David Martin, George Fugii, Steve Kissel, Ferdi Canine, Diana Sublet, Riz Angel, Randy Ott Mike Hagen, Gary Merlo, Gary, Dan Haney, Barron, Donnie Stuart, Matt Garcia, Scott Smith, Dean Wilderson, Tommy Barker, Romy Cabugal, Tess Rano, Brian Go, Richard Urbano, Anabelle Jones, Aleta Hansen, Adam Chun, Scott Ross, Allen Clark, Sandy Hughes, Gwen Haney, Brenda Darling, Mark Predar, Milt Henderson, Tanika Thompson, Eric Rizel, Bobby Rocchi, Lydie Jones Smitesh Parmar, and Dino Rodriguez who KJN Ernie borrowed \$1,200 to start his first martial arts school. It was Dino's money he saved as a paperboy when he was 12 years old and one of KJN's Ernie first black belts as a youth.

Just by the scope of the decadent venue, one would have thought Hollywood had packed up all the glitz, glamour and splendor of the Oscars and air-expressed it all to the Bay Area for that evening's social event of the year. The red carpet, spotlights, limousines, paparazzi, dazzling stage shows, tuxedos, evening gowns, candle-lit dining, live music and pizzazz were all a part of that evening's fabulous package. And what an exciting evening it was for all of the guests that had been invited to attend this five-star gala and share in the extravagant show that would unfold until past midnight.

The Ernie Reyes West Coast World Martial Arts Association, under the direction of co-founder Master Tony Thompson and general coordinators KJN Donna Bernardi, Kevin Ruby, Margie Betke and Smitesh Parmar had done a magnificent job of presenting one of the finest celebrations that has ever been attended by martial artists in Northern California.

In addition to the birthday kudos, it was also a meaningful evening of honor its own and commemorate the accomplishments that had transpired over the past three-decades since the West Coast Martial Arts Association had established its niche in the Bay Area martial arts community. This, in essence, was a culminating effort that has since spread across the United States and abroad. Today, that unceasing passion to share their own unique style of martial arts, has ostensibly resulted in producing forty world-class branch schools that collectively tout an enrollment of over 7,000 students.

Notably, Ernie Reyes, Sr. and his partner Tony Thompson initially began their fledgling organization in the 1970s and the celebration that evening was their way of paying tribute to all of the teachers, staff and students that had made their many accomplishments possible.

By 4:30 in the afternoon guests had begun arriving at the luxurious convention center. The stylishly-attired valet parking attendants swung into action, as each guest was ushered to the entrance of the complex. There on the red carpet they were greeted by the organization's staff photographer Piercy Bastiany where each couple posed for photographs before being escorted inside.

The organization had spared no expense in lavishly decorating the lobby that matched the plush interior decor perfectly with a martial arts theme. The guest passed through a corridor featuring a vast collection of photo images that had been digitally decoupage on canvas banners depicting the evolving stages of growth in Ernie Reyes' extraordinary 60 years of life and 30 years of his martial arts life.

Each separate 4 x 8 foot panel featured a series of photographs highlighting his family, his early martial arts beginnings, his organization, his friends, his Association leaders, his Hollywood career and a vast array of media in which Ernie Reyes, Sr. had appeared over the past three-decades. These included significant articles and photos excerpted from major martial arts magazines, newspapers, television and motion pictures. For everyone that knew of Ernie's illustrious career as a martial artist it was like taking a walk down memory lane. It was time to fondly reminisce and recount those moments that had been captured in photographs he had shared so that they too had chance to relive those cherished memories from his past.

The plush dinner setting and decor in the exclusive Great American ballroom was first-class in every respect. In fact, it was so befitting for the occasion that would have been equally worthy as a formal banquet site for a diplomatic gathering for the heads of state of great nations. Adding to the stately ambience was the subtle dimmed-lighting, exquisite place-settings, ornate centerpieces and warmth of the dining room where the contemporary music played softly during the serving of the main course. The sumptuous cuisine served that evening to the 600 dinner guests was five-star quality with all of the accouterments that would undoubtedly rival that of the finest restaurants in San Francisco. The West Coast Martial Arts Association had spared no expense to make this the utmost memorable experience for all that were in attendance to share Master Ernie Reyes, Sr.'s 60th birthday 30 year association celebration.

As dinner was about to be served his wife and soul-mate Marge Betke, sons Ernie Jr., Lee and children Destiny, Espirit and Ki exited the limousine as Master Reyes drove up behind the limo in his 1977 yellow dodge van. Yes, 30 years later, it is still ticking. The Reyes family then made their entrance into the Great America lobby. The entire Reyes clan looked radiantly stunning in formal attire and for many it was the first time they had seen them all together and dressed in something other than the usual martial arts wear. Dressed to the nines, it was obvious to most that knew the Reyes family well, that something ultra-special was about to unfold for his birthday. This much anticipated arrival seemed to evoke an uncanny silence that stirred excitement of what was to come next.

Several seconds later, master of ceremonies Tony Thompson announced the Reyes family's arrival and greeted his partner with the same exuberance and fanfare that the guest did at defining moment where he was to realize just how many people had come to honor him. The energy was simply amazing as he gazed around to take in all of the splendor and outpouring of affection that was meant for him on this special evening. A touching birthday speech was forthcoming and then there was the unveiling of a four-tiered birthday cake made especially in his honor. Ernie rationalized his reasoning by informing all in his presence that the sword would be used later to cut his birthday cake.

As the main course was being served Reyes made his rounds to all of the tables and personally thanked each and every guest for coming to his birthday party. It was a poignant time for everyone just to have a moment of his time on such a busy night to wish him happy birthday and share a few moments and taking photos to commemorate the evening's festivities.

During dinner an audio-visual presentation was shown on the center screen in the main ballroom. It featured an assemblage of birthday greetings from many notable martial pioneers, champions and personalities that are established leaders that could not attend that night. Among these distinguished innovators included: Dan K. Choi (Ernie's Tae Kwon Do teacher), Jhoon Rhee (father of tae kwon do in America), Tony Robbins (world renowned motivational speaker), Dan Millman (author of *The Way of The Peaceful Warrior*) Bill Wallace (undefeated retired world karate middle weight champion), Cynthia Rothrock (world champion and kung-fu film star), Tom Patire (personal safety expert), John Corcoran (celebrated author and pioneering martial arts journalist), Rob Colasante, (president of the National Association of Professional Martial Artists) Frank Silverman (president of MAIA – Martial Arts Industry Association) Nick Cokinos (founder of the Educational Funding Company) among others. World Champions Chuck Lydell and Benny Urquidez are still sending in their best wishes after the party.

Following the dinner hour, master Tony Thompson invited everyone upstairs to the multimedia theatre for a special presentation and demonstrations that had been planned especially for them. Few realized what waited in store for them at this point in the program.

The evening's agenda was an action-packed venue that was nothing short of sheer fantasy and excitement from the beginning to end. Opening with a comprehensive visual presentation viewed on the huge screen on stage, everyone got a chance to see highlighted vignettes of Master Ernie Reyes life unfold in timeline fashion. His early times growing up failing grade school two times, playing sports, beginning karate as a white belt, becoming a tournament champion, seeing his students mature and reach their potential, observing the organization grow, his cinematic exploits in Hollywood, working in film with his son Ernie, Jr. and a myriad of other events that clearly defined the experiences and adventures that had, over the years, a profound impact on Ernie's philosophy and outlook on life. To the youthful "new generation" of students and instructors, they all realized that their mentor had packed a lot of living in his youthful sixty-years.

Another featured attraction to the already action-packed agenda was an exhibition of Japanese taiko drumming performed by the San Francisco Taiko Dojo headed by Grandmaster Seiichi Tanaka, who was the pioneer in bringing Taiko drumming to America.

After formally presenting Ernie Reyes with a special birthday present on stage, the troupe commenced to demonstrate what had made them one of the preeminent taiko schools in the world. Tanaka Sensei has received Japan's Foreign Ministers Commendation and the National Endowment for the Arts' National Heritage Fellows Award in recognition of his work promoting the art of taiko and he and his group's exceptional skills were evident that night for all to appreciate.

In feudal Japan, *taiko* were often used to motivate troops, to help set a marching pace, and to call out orders or announcements. Approaching or entering a battle, the *taiko yaku* (drummer) was responsible for setting the marching pace. Over the centuries this ancient drumming art had evolved as an art and the sensei became the bearer of the torch to pass along to the next generation.

For fifteen minutes the troupe artfully recreated the style, technique and tempos that were reminiscent of those ancient rhythms used on the battlefields of feudal-age Japan. This enthralling exhibition was as spirited in intensity as it was varied in syncopation. Highlighting this performance was the exemplary talents displayed by each member of the taiko ensemble to demonstrate their versatility by playing every instrument (drum) on stage.

In concluding the taiko performance grandmaster Seiichi Tanaka and his troupe received numerous rounds of applause for such an excellent performance.

Next, the action-martial arts stage show was to be pure eye candy that was as spectacular in essence as it was chocked with brilliant sensationalism. The choreography and stunning artistry of the World West Coast Demo Team was the centerpiece of the show and every performance was nothing short of spectacular. Donna Bernardi had done a marvelous of creating and orchestrating the action choreography and every routine was executed with amazing precision to the rhythm of select upbeat music used during the performances.

The enormous energy, effort and physical endurance exhibited by the demo team was enough to make most queasy with exhaustion after witnessing this awesome display of visual artistry performed to the upbeat music that was perfectly suited for each drill. The team's energy was contagious and it seemed that with each unique performance the team members kept building a crescendo that sent their enthusiasm skyrocketing through the roof. Some surmised that this would be the case since they were doing this for their founder on his birthday and they were very proud to honor him in this manner.

The aerial gymnastics, high-flying precision breaking, dizzying split-second timing of action self-defense fighting scenarios were demonstrated in such rapid fashion that it was all but impossible to assimilate all of the intricacies that was going on at any given time. The senses were on virtual overload trying to decide between watching and trying to imagine the work that had went into staging such an awesome display of martial arts action. Each feat seemed to top the previous in creativity and precision. That evening the World West Coast Demo Team lived up to their reputation as a world-class action martial arts performance troupe while honoring their founder and leader.

What was equally impressive was Ernie Reyes's involvement with the demonstrations himself. Clad in nothing more than his trademarked glittering "gypsy" pants and sparkling gold belt, he, being the consummate perfectionist, demonstrated many of the martial arts skills that had made him a world champion during his competitive days. Several of his demonstrations exemplified his phenomenal skills in self-defense in both traditional empty-hand and stick fighting. Others, still, displayed his talents in traditional and Thai boxing.

His rippled muscles and taut, lithe torso defied his physical years. In fact, his honed sinewy physique gave the distinct impression that he was a man half the age of the birthdays he had enjoyed over the past sixty-years. He performed a beautifully orchestrated kama (sickle) kata to music (titled Mama) that had been purposely created for the celebration that night, to honor his mother, father and all the mothers of his association and friends. To the delight of the crowd, his stunning performance garnered exuberating standing ovation from the 600+ spectators that witnessed this dazzling display of martial artistry.

The 2007 World Action Team performers were:

Kim Do, Lee Reyes, Brian Go, Joachim Dedekin, Matt Garcia, Marques Mallare, Brenda Darling, Anthony Gooch, Chris Divera, Destiny Reyes, Espirit Reyes, Ki Reyes, George Calderon, Natalie Guardino, Billy Guardino, Jacqueline Miller, Breann Reese, Adam Chun, Chirs Balua, Hoai Le, Jermey Smith, Jeremy Marais, Anis Chuerfa, Josh Kerswell, Justin Baltazar, Joyce Baltazar, Jane Baltzar, Jennie Baltazar, Ricky Strehlow, Justin Morales, Jarmin Runes, Justin Runes, Angela Savedra, Aaron Sandman, Alyssa DeJang, Robert DeJang, Sammy Tu, Josephy Gacayan, Nico Nieves, Chris Bacosa, Philip Benitez, Zack, Ricky Jones, Bill Guardino, Riz Angel, David Medina, Smitesh Parmar, Hector Rodriguez, Jeffery Miller, and the Jewels: KJN Donna Bernardi and Kevin Ruby. .

It was surprising to see the "Next Generation Demo Team of of 90's. It was all planned by KJN Donna Bernardi. It touched KJN Ernie Reyes' heart tremendously. The surprised demo team of: Utahna Baxter, Jackie Ruby, Angela Garcia, David Douglas, Mike Foster, Donnie Stuart, Wayne Meadows, Andy Nyugen, Steven Wong, Lee Reyes, Kim Do, and Peter Yang, Richard and RJ Alabano, Patrick Cacayan, Ayelete Arbel, Danielle and Danny Rodgers, Matt Garcia, Ferdie Cadiente, and Brian Go.

What was another added treat for the crowd was an onstage training exhibition session with Ernie Reyes and his son Ernie, Jr. With pads and boxing gloves the father and son team commenced to demonstrate what had made them great fighters over the years. Flurries of rapid combinational Thai kicking maneuvers, artfully executed punching drills, evasive blocking and countering exercises made what could be considered by many a standard training session a spectacular display of brilliant combative strategy in action.

Immediately following, it was both a surprise and an honor to Reyes when the Mayor Daniel Furtado of Campbell and Mayor Patricia M. Mahan of Santa Clara, California came up on stage and each, in turn, ceremoniously awarded him official city proclamations for his numerous contributions to their fair cities.

Notably, both politicians emphasized the thousands of children through his teaching of excellence that had, over the years, inspired countless thousands of students to pursue a life enriched by the qualities emphasized through the study of martial arts. From the appreciative look on Ernie's face it was obvious to all that he truly moved by these honors and graciously accepted these accolades with humbleness and humility that only a master of the martial arts of his caliber could by sharing and doing what he loves to so much.

Following these formalities, Ernie Reyes brother Sonny (72 years old) stepped on stage sang the Impossible Dream (The Quest) made famous in the Man of La Mancha (Don Quixote) stage production. Unaccompanied by music, his voice resonated through the theater with a clarity and richness reminiscent of the actual stage production. Ernie sat silently at the edge of the stage and savored this tribute while pondering just how much the lyrics of the song meant to him personally.

Later, obvious moved by the many accolades and honors that were bestowed on him that night, Reyes made a speech thanking all who had come to be a part of this momentous event.

On several instances, Ernie found it difficult to hold back the tears as he elaborated on the realization of just how much impact his love for the martial arts had been in having an affect on so many lives he had touched over the past thirty years. Expounding, he emphasized that he was proud that many of his students lives had been affected so positively by his teachings and have went on to become very successful in their chosen professions.

Next, as a special treat to everyone in attendance, many of Ernie Reyes's very first generation demo team took to the stage and performed an awe inspiring routine set to music. Opening with a well-timed and superbly coordinated group form routine, the "old school" demo team never missed a beat as the troupe executed a flawless series of self-defense techniques hidden within the kata.

Ernie observed from the side stage and looked like a proud father as his original team members from over twenty-five years ago, displayed impeccable timing, speed, balance and power just the way the performed in the old days. The demo team members proved that they still had the "right stuff" to evoke numerous rounds of rousing applause from an appreciative audience. Though not as flamboyant or gymnastically oriented in style and flair as the latest generation of his troupe, they too were duly impressed with their martial arts skills and exacting perfection. Noticeable to everyone present was the fact that the "old guard" exhibited self-defense techniques that were not only crisp, precise and powerfully executed but were rhythmically in sync just as they had performed several decades earlier.

Also performing that night was the Mastery Team along with ISKA Kick Boxing Champion Jean Claude, who demonstrated the evolution of our mixed martial art system. They executed the basic kicks, sparring kicks, self defense releases, stick fighting system, and CDT gun disarms that displayed our practical self defense versatility.

Next, the audience was introduced to Mike Swain and he was invited on stage to say a few words about his relationship with Ernie Reyes. As a judo champion, Mike was the first man from the Western Hemisphere, to win a gold medal at the prestigious World Championships, since its inception in 1956.

As a World Champion, 4 - time Olympian (bronze medalist in the Seoul Games) and 1996 Olympic Coach, Mike shared with the audience of how he had been inspired by Ernie Reyes and complimented him for being such an inspiration to the countless thousands and thousands of people that had involved themselves in the martial arts for personal growth and development. In closing Swain shared with the audience that he hopes that he would look that good when he turns sixty-years old.

After the show had concluded, master Tony Thompson then invited all of the guests back downstairs to the main ballroom for the formal cutting of the birthday cake and to enjoy a traditional performance of the Chinese lion dance to welcome in the Chinese New Year together.

This was quite appropriate and timely since Ernie was born in the Chinese year of the boar (February 12, 1947) and the official Chinese New Year of the boar was only two days away.

Master Ernie used his razor sharp samurai sword doing a creative form that he created 2-days before, to cut the birthday cake and everyone part took in this delectable desert. The 8 - lion dance performance enhanced the experience and the troupe shared in the celebration after demonstrating their phenomenal kung-fu skills for the guests.

Following, the musical ensemble "Hitmen", a band comprised of eleven unique and talented professional musicians, played the mega-hits of the 60's, 70's & 80's for the guests swung into action. The audience experienced the live energy and non-stop dance floor excitement of this timeless music well after midnight had passed and the evening came to a close.

It was a perfect ending to an exquisite evening of celebrating the life and times of a respected martial artist named Ernie Reyes, Sr. who has had such an enormous impact on so many people's lives during the past thirty years. His guidance as a martial arts instructor, mentor, role model and compassionate human being that shared his knowledge, wisdom and love was the message that this exciting evening conveyed. Many more happy birthdays are sure to follow for one that has given back more to the art than he has taken from it.

For me, KJN Ernie, this was our night at Oscar's. With all of you being the stars in my life!

What does this mean?

We must have the "Power To Carry On!" & "Train To Last!"