

Ann Arborites

Nick Suino

Swordsman, author, lawyer

Swords sheathed at their sides, Nicklaus Suino and five students stare straight ahead in stillness and concentration. Then, moving in silence as a unit, they draw their three-foot-long swords from their scabbards, making a series of slow synchronized movements before gracefully resheathing the weapons. As they move slowly into a kneeling position, they tuck wide pant legs between their knees with a flapping sound reminiscent of wings.

The black *hakama* pants are Japanese. So are the *katanas*, curved single-edge swords traditionally used by samurai. Though he's a native Ann Arborite, Suino is internationally acclaimed for his expertise in *iaido* (ee-EYE-dough), or Zen swordsmanship. The author of *The Art of Japanese Swordsmanship* (now in its ninth printing), he is one of just two Westerners ever invited to compete in the national all-sword-forms tournament in Japan.

The forty-six-year-old swordsman is soft spoken and bespectacled, with hazel eyes and dark, close-cropped hair. His presence enhances the calm in his *dojo* (training hall), the Japanese Martial Arts Center, housed in an industrial building on Airport Boulevard.

The skills Suino teaches contrast sharply with the Hollywood-style swashbuckling familiar to most Americans. *Iaido* emphasizes cutting down the enemy with precision and economy of motion. It's primarily a solo endeavor, however—and one with an ancient philosophy behind it. Zen swordsmanship drills, explains Suino, "are designed to assist the student in their ability to perceive truth. By learning to focus on the details of the arts, students sharpen their perceptions. At the same time, through long-term, highly focused practice, they develop a sense of selflessness."

Suino's students refer to him as *sensei* (teacher). "Suino Sensei emphasizes the active practice of sincerity, politeness, loyalty, honor, and courage," says student Amy Prior. On the practical side, adds Demosthenes Lorandos, "he puts us in situations where we have to learn to think on the fly and move quickly—as we might have to in a real situation."

Suino found his passion young. The son of U-M Russian professor Mark Suino and artist Dorothea Suino, he began studying judo at age eight at the Y. He moved on to Asian Martial Arts Studio,



MARK BIALEK

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where he studied karate, aikido, and several Chinese martial arts. And he earned a footnote in history in 1985 when, as a graduate assistant, he opened a package sent to U-M psychologist Jim McConnell: the package was from the Unabomber, Ted Kaczynski, and Suino was seriously injured. He was hospitalized for a night and took six weeks to recover fully. "It was the first moment where I realized my mortality—that I was not impervious," he says.

Suino has more to say about another episode that changed his life's course. Hoping to become a novelist, he earned an M.F.A. in creative writing from the U-M. But his thesis—a novel about a 1980s pop group—was "a miserable book," he says, bluntly. "One of my teachers said, 'If you want to write fiction, you have to throw away your first million words.'"

Instead, lured by the possibility of studying Japanese martial arts in their country of origin, Suino moved to Yokohama. He got a job preparing course materials for English-language classes. Eventually he gained entree into the elite circles of Japanese martial arts, thanks to a letter

of introduction from Walter Todd, a highly respected practitioner. "That opened all the doors for me," says Suino, "who met masters like Shizuya Sato, director of the International Martial Arts Federation. While in Yokohama, he competed in four regional forms competitions with the sword—and earned the respect of the Japanese martial arts community by placing first in every one of them. Originally intending to stay six months, Suino lived in Japan for four years.

Returning to Michigan, he opened a dojo in East Lansing in 1993, while also writing and giving demonstrations around the country. His route to the dojo took him past the Thomas M. Cooley Law School, and Suino became intrigued by the sight of students inside immersed in their textbooks. Over a game of cribbage in Metzger's German Restaurant, "I bet my father that I could be admitted to Cooley by fall of 1995," recalls Suino with a smile. Cooley had a year-and-a-half wait for entrance but made an exception for students with especially strong grade point averages and LSAT scores. After living and breathing the LSAT for a summer, Suino scored in the ninety-fifth percentile on the test—and won five bucks from his father.

After graduation, Suino turned over daily operation of the East Lansing dojo to two senior students and took a job with a Traverse City law firm. But the urge to teach martial arts, coupled with the desire to have his own practice, soon led him back to southeastern Michigan. Last June he opened both the Japanese Martial Arts Center and the Law Office of Nicklaus Suino, PLLC. "Ann Arbor's sort of a perfect place to open a dojo," says Suino. He and his wife, Pamela, who cleans houses for a living and is training in *iaido*, live in the Georgetown neighborhood.

Suino's law practice centers on services to small businesses. "I try to be a proactive agent for businesses under the premise that an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure," he says. His practice of law and his mastery of Japanese swordsmanship aren't as far apart as they might appear, he insists. He points out that "strategy, character development, organization, and the ability to visualize the big picture are essential to both endeavors."

—Yma Johnson

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