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A KUNG-FU KING'S RISE FROM POVERTY TO PROSPERITY

By Steve DeMasco as told to Herb Borkland



New Hampshire-based Steve DeMasco has climbed from a poverty-stricken youth to one of our industry's biggest kung-fu entrepreneurs. He owns 12 thriving Shaolin Studios in three states, with five more affiliates in three other states. DeMasco oversees more than 3,000 students, and every year, he takes up to 50 of them to China to train with the fighting monks at the legendary Shaolin Temple.

In this extraordinary story, meet the man whose climb from the projects in New York City's Spanish Harlem to the top of his profession includes working with a U.S. President and the grandmaster abbot of Shaolin!



Although Chinese fighting styles amount to only about 8% of our industry's schools, kung-fu's deep traditions, radically different fighting strategies, and sometimes hair-raising training methods make them stand out as the oldest crown jewels in the international treasure-trove of martial arts. Few American wushu students meet the Chinese grandmasters of their traditional arts, much less pass in person among the overseas elite.

Sifu Steve DeMasco has come from a devastatingly poor background to achieve the highest promotion of any living American at the historical headquarters of all-Asian combat, the Shaolin Temple. He's a direct disciple of the Shaolin abbot, who has named DeMasco the Temple's official

"American Ambassador." This is a special office bestowed in part because of DeMasco's personal service to a president of the United States. And that service was for DeMasco simply to go out and tell his story to the public. Now DeMasco, in his own words, does the same for MASUCCESS readers. His long climb from poverty to prosperity is an inspirational example of overcoming obstacles to achieve the American Dream!

— Herb Borkland

Growing Up with No Advantages

I was born in New York City; I'm not sure where. I grew up in Spanish Harlem, and it was pretty bad in the projects. All the kids there were poor and wore crewcuts. I thought I was Puerto Rican; I didn't know what an Italian was until some kid called me a "wop," so I ate pasta from then on. My dad was physically

abusive, a bad man to my mother and me. Let me tell you a little about her because she was the catalyst for everything I do.

Mom was born into an immigrant Italian family, but she lived in a Catholic hostel until she turned 18 because of health issues. She was born with all her bones broken and had to undergo multiple operations. She never talked much; she was a very humble woman who had both her legs cut off when she was nine years of age. They did it without telling her first because they didn't want to upset her.

At 18, angry with her parents, she went to the streets — a serious Catholic with an eighth-grade education and four fingers

on one hand who worked as a barmaid in Greenwich Village. Mom was told she'd never be able to have children who would live, but I was the miracle child. And she was the pillar.

We moved to Brockton, Massachusetts. I repeated third grade, and mom became the founder of Head Start in Massachusetts [a federal program to help low-income family children prepare for school]. We got off welfare. Mom died at 62 of a heart aneurysm.

I left home at 16, but I still took care of mom and her sisters. I worked split-shifts. A sophomore at Brockton with my own apartment, I sold shoes 40 hours a week and did full-time school. Seven thousand kids went to Brockton; in those days, it was the largest school east of the Mississippi.

My best friend was Dennis. Everybody was scared of him, so nobody messed with me. But one night, I was by myself at a party where blacks and whites were

dancing together and a white girl's boyfriend beat the hell out of me. I was a minor, so no hospital stay [or the police would have gotten involved]. But Dennis showed up and told me, "Brother, you got to learn how to fight."

Learning How to Fight

Fifties' World Heavyweight Champion Rocky Marciano put his hometown of Brockton on the map. You entered the Rocky Marciano Gym — a real dump, by then — through a bar owned by a fat Mafia bookie. He loved kids and paid for us to train there. We didn't pay for lessons; we just fought. The trainer took good care of you, too. You didn't see a ring for six months. First, it was roadwork and calisthenics.

Were we natural fighters? Say, instead, it was an angry environment, so in the ring, you had a different mentality, and everything lousy in

your life came out in that ring. I never really wanted to fight, but in the ring, when I caught a face punch, my whole demeanor changed. To this day, that's who I am.

So, we trained harder, worked harder. I was a Golden Gloves Champion, so the question became, "Go pro, or go to college?" That's when I started with the martial arts. Brockton in the early '70s had a karate school.

Years later, I set a United States Professional Karate Association record for *Fastest Knockout With a Kick in Full Contact Karate*: 22.7 seconds. I'm still proud of that.





Professionally, I went from selling shoes to being an agent for world-class recording artists. I started booking bands in high school. After I went to college, I had six bands. This big-time management company took notice and, in 1975, they offered me \$25,000 a year plus expenses and 25% of the action to move to Pittsburgh, PA.

I took the job and ended up representing [legendary soul singer] James Brown and [the famed 1950s doo-wop group] The Platters, and booking USO Tours. But I was always taking martial arts lessons. I studied tang soo do in Pittsburgh, then the northern praying mantis style after we moved the office to Boston in 1977.

33 Years of Private Lessons

One day in Boston, I saw a wah lum [northern praying mantis kung-fu] demo. I was walking down the aisle, checking out this skinny little 5-foot-10 guy who weighed 180, and, not knowing he was Grandmaster Chan Pui, I told my girl, "I'll

kick his ass!" I believed Chinese arts were flexible, fast, and fluid, but had no power. However, I saw his top student do plumb-flower form, and right away I thought, 'I want to do that!'

So instead, I took private lessons every week for the next 14 years. Chan Pui said I was "The white boy who would not go away."

I got out of booking musical acts and opened my first school, a Fred Villari Shaolin Kempo location, in 1980. This was not what I was looking for. But, I stayed on to become a senior vice-president of the company within 15 years, mostly because we made lots of money, and I didn't want [competitors] to open across the street.

By now, I was studying the black tiger system. New York Chinatown grandmaster,

Wai Hong, inspired me. At first, they wouldn't let me through the door. I kept going back, twice a month for a couple years. Finally, a senior student offered me private lessons for \$100 an hour. The price was meant to discourage me, but I don't put off so easily.

After 12 years with them, Wai Hong closed his school and became a recluse who only taught tai-chi sword to seniors in the park. One day, I was at a weapons store, looked out the window and there was the grandmaster. So I went outside to talk. I had published a book called *An American Journey to the Shaolin Temple*. He told me, "Steve, you need a lot of help. I will help you."



I trained every week for two years in his apartment in Chinatown — personal training for free. It improved me.

Presidential Appointee

Over the years, I kept up my education. I received my bachelor's degree in psychology from Southern Massachusetts University, followed by a master's at Southern Connecticut University, capped by a doctorate in philosophy from United States Sports Academy.

In 1990, I founded my own United Studios. I was living in Connecticut, where my twin sons were born. I was working as a New Haven Public Education Fund's "Partner in Education," mentoring street kids. You're always a hero when you work for free!

One day, I attended a meeting with Jan Paschal, a Bill Clinton Presidential Appointee, and a powerful woman from Arkansas.

I told her my story. By then, I had a four-year degree in psychology. Jan said, "I want you to meet the president." Two weeks later, I picked her up at the airport, and we went to see President Clinton. The president landed in Air Force One, came down the ramp, and walked up to us. When Jan started



to introduce me, "This is Steve ... " he finished for her: "DeMasco," he said. He knew my name!

Two days later, Jan and I met the President in a better setting. A Marine helicopter dropped him off. All kinds of politicians were in a fenced-off area full of press and photographers with long-distance bazooka lenses. A Secret Service agent summoned

FAST FACTS ABOUT STEVE DEMASCO'S SHAOLIN STUDIOS

Do you offer a family discount and, if so, how much?

20-40%

Amount of yearly tuition?

\$2,400

Monthly gross?

\$20,000 on the newer studios; over \$41,000
on the more established studios.

Monthly pro-shop gross?

Variable: 6-10% of each studio's gross. We are
working towards 15-20%.

Are your children and adult classes separate or mixed?

Separate, with 5 different age-group classes.

Are you a MAIA member?

Yes

Name of your billing company?

We do ours internally.

Name and locations of your schools?

Steve DeMasco's Shaolin Studios (SDSS): 3 in
New Hampshire, including our headquarters in
Concord; 7 in Connecticut; and 2 in Pennsylvania.
Affiliates: 3 in Virginia and 2 in California.

Number of years in business?

6 as SDSS

Do you charge testing fees and, if so, how much?

Yes, between \$55-\$500, depending on the
belt rank.

Do you have an after-school pick-up program?

No

Number of schools you operate?

12, with 5 affiliates.

Size of your schools in square footage?

1,200-2,000

Number of employees (both full-time and part-time)?

1-5 per studio

Number of active students?

3,000+ between all studios

From which company do you purchase most of your pro-shop supplies (including uniforms and sparring gear)?

Century Martial Art Supply in Oklahoma City, OK

How much do you charge for the first family member per month?

Average: \$195



Jan and me out of the corral. I walked up to the helicopter surrounded by admirals and generals, and Clinton stood beside me, arm around my shoulder and leaning on me like I was holding him up.

"Steve," he said, "I want to thank you for what you're doing for the children of our country."

Me! I'll always be a kid from the projects, and here I was with the President of the

United States, hearing thank you. I went to a hundred schools lecturing with Jan, three days a week for five years. At podiums from state prisons all the way up to Harvard and Yale universities, I always began by telling them, 'I am here at the order of the president.'

Connecting with the Shaolin Temple

I got to the Shaolin Temple by accident. I'm a Catholic, but this is Buddhist fate.

In 1997, I met a doctor in Westport [Connecticut] who was doing business in China. We were sitting with a Chinese general who asked me about kung-fu, Chan Pui and Wai Hong. A few weeks later, I got a letter from the Chinese government offering a tour. This led to a first-class flight to China, arriving to find a general's limo waiting. Jing Jing, my guide, J.J., for short. J.J. escorted me to Beijing University, then to a meeting with the Governor, and on to our last stop at Shaolin.

We came at five o'clock in the morning to meet the [Shaolin Temple's] grandmaster abbot. Through a translator, the abbot and I talked about life. Then, after an hour, he stood up and walked out without a single word. J.J. and I followed and ended up standing for 15 minutes outside this massive, world-famous temple door. Beyond is an inner area where only special masters train. Even



to open the door, you must go completely around the monastery. So that explained our long wait.

Inside were two disciples chosen to perform black tiger and praying mantis for me. They blew me away. I was

stunned and so honored. Then it was my turn. Back home, I'd been warned that they'd ask for a demo, so I was taught "Iron Wire," which is old Shaolin. No one has that form because only three other people in the States know it. It's a long form — no jumping, no kicks, all dynamic tension.

Three minutes into the form, there is one of those classic kung-fu foot stomps. When my foot hit — hard! — dust flew up around me out of those famous stones hollowed out by 1,500 years of fighting monks. Ever see [the 1978 Shaw Brothers' classic] *36th Chamber of Shaolin*? When I finished, nobody clapped, only smiled.

Then, two days later, J.J. handed me a diploma certifying me as a Shaolin master, with the abbot's seal. It was on July 1, 1997, the day England returned Hong Kong to mainland China.

When I got home, everybody went nuts: "No one has this in this country but you!" I had been made the official ambassador



to represent Shaolin in the United States. And for the last 15 years, as his personal disciple, the abbot takes me up in the mountains and trains me in the oldest Shaolin forms. I've gone back every summer, and I take students along.

My brilliant business partner, Master Mike Myers, and I have been leading tours for 15 years. Our groups are made up of about 25-50 students from my 12 schools, usually about half men and half women. We travel in July on an 11-day, all-inclusive tour.

We offer first-class accommodations; visits to Beijing and the Forbidden City; a Shaolin area tour; four days of training with the fighting monks inside the Temple; a Special Shaolin Certificate of Training; a ceremony and exchange of demonstrations with the abbot; mountain hikes through the sacred path surrounding Shaolin, including a visit to Bodhidharma's Cave; the best regional cuisine, and major shopping opportunities.

The cost per student is \$5,300, which includes five-star hotels and all tipping. If we took hundreds of students along, a 20 percent profit might be realized, but we don't like big trips. 25-50 people just about covers Mike's and my expenses.

I fly out a day ahead of everybody, traveling with J.J., while Mike sticks with the

buses. Our schedule is set from morning until night, so we leave nobody behind. Every city has guides waiting and there is a guide on every single bus.

Other schools offer trips to Shaolin, but only our people get to train inside the Temple. Other tours use the exterior Shaolin Training Center. Inside, when the fighting monks work with us, there is no condescension. Whatever your rank or experience is, the monks are glad to be helpful and truly inspire everybody they work with. Also, exclusive to us is the exchange with the abbot. We go where he lives. He sits outside, I stand beside him, and our students put on a demo. Then, out of respect, the monks put on one for us, too.

It is unforgettable.

Building a Kung-Fu Empire

I was president of United Studios from 1990 to 2007. I had 17 United schools, but I was sick of the rules and of charging for my name. While going about President Clinton's work, I lost what I had built.



So, since 2007, I own the Steve DeMasco Shaolin Studios. In my schools, there are no outsiders; they're all home-grown instructors. Every instructor owns a piece of his school, so they never feel like an employee.

Everybody attends a two-year academy. They learn the business aspects, from accounting to how to deal with kids who are troubled. I teach lifespan development, which is the study of how people process information and experience at different age levels. [Consequently] your kid gets trained by instructors who know how your child learns.

I also teach my instructors how to deal with parents. First, we do a half-hour intro, then we say, "Mrs. Jones, there are many beautiful schools in the area, but please keep in mind we are the only martial arts schools in the United States endorsed by the United States Department of Education. This is due to the Life Skills program we've developed. Also, we are the only schools endorsed by the Shaolin Temple."

We don't bow to higher rank. We bow to each

other out of mutual respect. That is the culture, and it is predicated on improving the quality of life of all people, by teaching [good] behavior, especially to troubled kids. We are not motivated solely by money, but, with a quality product, everything falls into place.

Personally, I'm tired of fads. I worry that the industry is going in the wrong direction by latching on to every new gimmick that comes along. I've taught the same styles for 35 years. If you help others achieve their goals, no matter what you teach, how we treat them [students] is what they truly care about.

This is what I always wanted. I grew up seeing [bad things] most people never see in their lifetime. I was once told, "You can't change the country, but

you can change the part you live in." When I die, it's what I leave behind that lasts forever. ■

Herb Borkland is a veteran black belt and martial arts writer living in Front Royal, Virginia.

To learn more about how hundreds of other successful school owners, both large and small, operate, visit the Martial Arts Industry Association's website at www.masuccess.com. Through this constantly-enhanced website, members can access a massive amount of useful information on just about any topic from A to Z.

