

Friends remember Lee in Seattle



SEATTLE (AP) — James DeMile recalls the first time he ran into Bruce Lee.

It was 1958, Asian Day on Seattle's Capitol Hill.

A frail-looking 18-year-old Chinese kid with thick, round glasses was demonstrating martial-arts movements.

To DeMile, a beefy, street-smart, 20-year-old former Air Force champion boxer, it didn't look like fighting.

"So I went up to him and said, 'Gee, kid, that stuff looks good, but over here we're mean fighters.'"

The kid challenged DeMile to try to hit him.

DeMile fired a straight right. The kid parried the strike, then trapped both of DeMile's arms.

"Before I knew it, boom, boom, boom! He was hitting me on the head," DeMile recalled. To finish it off, the kid knocked on DeMile's forehead, as if to see if anyone was home.

"That's when I met Bruce Lee. And I learned humility in about five seconds," says DeMile, now a kung-fu grandmaster who operates a martial-arts school in north Seattle.

A decade later, Lee would go on to stardom, finding fame in Hong Kong, then in the United States as international cinema's first martial-arts box office superstar.

But to DeMile and others, it was the roughly five years Lee spent in Seattle — his late teens and early 20s — that are among his most revealing. The Seattle years — largely overlooked in the recently released movie *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story* — are those of a brash, cocky kid who found admiration through martial arts, peace through philosophy, love by chance and, ultimately, fame through determination.

"Those were among the happiest days we spent together," says Lee's former wife, Linda, who now lives in Boise, Idaho. "Bruce loved Seattle. It was a very peaceful and uncomplicated time of his life, when life was simple and fun."

Lee was born in San Francisco in 1940, while the Chinese opera troupe of which his father was a member was touring the United States. Lee spent his childhood in Hong Kong, then returned to the United States at age 18.

After a brief stay in California, Lee moved to Seattle, where his parents arranged for him to live with Ping and Ruby Chow.

Ping was also a member of the Hong Kong opera troupe and knew Lee's father. Ruby was a prominent member of Seattle's Chinese community and would later serve on the King County Council.

"Bruce was kind of like a prodigy in terms of kung fu. When he talked, everybody listened," says Jesse Glover, Lee's first kung-fu student. "But when he started talking about other subjects he sounded like a typical 18-year-old."

Lee and his students opened a small martial-arts club in Chinatown, and later in the University District when he enrolled at the University of Washington.

Those who knew him in Seattle describe Lee as a bit of a showboat — a look-at-me youth who captured attention at parties and other gatherings by doing two-finger push-ups and other acrobatic feats.

Lee also had a serious side to him.

"He could tell you the raunchiest joke and the next minute he would be spouting some deep philosophy," says Taky Kimura, who became Lee's assistant instructor and his closest friend. "He was a very charismatic person."

"He would go out and find poems in Chinese and come back to the HUB (the University of Washington's student center) and recite them and ask me what I thought," said Lonny Kaneko, who Lee met at the UW. "People talk about the extroverted exterior he had, but he was also sensitive."

While at UW, Lee met and fell in love with Linda Emery, whom he would eventually marry.

"At first I thought, 'This guy is pretty cocky.' But there's a difference between being cocky and having a sense of great confidence," Linda says. "It was soon clear that everything he said he could do, he could do."

Linda also discovered Lee's philosophical side.

"He wasn't always making jokes and goofing around. We could have long serious discussions about life."

Though he didn't excel in school, Linda says, Lee read voraciously. He was especially fond of books on Eastern philosophy, martial arts and self-improvement.

"He was very focused. That enabled him to achieve the things he did in his short life," she says.

Lee never finished college and left Seattle in 1964 for Oakland, Calif. His goal was to start a chain of martial-arts schools.

While in California, Lee was "discovered" by a television producer named William Dozier. He was cast in the short-lived series *The Green Hornet*.

Lee was later considered by Warner Brothers for the lead role in the TV series *Kung Fu*, but was passed over in favor of David Carradine. Colleagues said Lee was infuriated at the snub.

It wasn't until he returned to Hong Kong that he found stardom in martial-arts films.

He made just a handful and was in the midst of filming his last, *Game of Death*, when he died July 20, 1973, in Hong Kong. The official cause of death was a brain aneurysm in the vicinity of the cerebral edema. Tabloids in Hong Kong and elsewhere raised more sensational theories, ranging from death by drugs to a murder carried out by Hong Kong gangs known as triads.

Nearly two decades later, Lee's son Brandon would also die under mysterious circumstances. Brandon, 28, was filming a movie in North Carolina when he was fatally shot with a prop gun that was supposed to be loaded with blanks.

The tombstones of Bruce and Brandon stand side-by-side in Lake View Cemetery on Seattle's Capitol Hill. The dirt around them is well-trodden; every day brings a steady trickle of friends and admirers, well-wishers and tourists.

'Those were among the happiest days we spent together. Bruce loved Seattle. It was a very peaceful and uncomplicated time of his life, when life was simple and fun.'

— Linda Lee, Bruce Lee's widow

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