

## Former stuntman brings knowledge and skills to island

By Ann C. Peterson  
WHT Correspondent

Michael Vendrell recounts his life with pivotal events: "I was apprenticed to a master of qi gung at age 3, became a cage fighter at 16 and a Hollywood stuntman at 21."

Back in the mid 1950s, Vendrell's uncle was a friend of Master Leong. The master's son had just died and he was looking for someone to pass his knowledge to. Vendrell was suggested.

Leong was head of the Yee Chuan Tao, or "one fist away" family — which practiced the Taoist form of qi gung, a 5,000-year-old discipline.

"At first we just did games where I pretended I was a monkey or a tiger. It wasn't until I was about 10 that I realized I was doing martial arts," said Vendrell, who explains that martial arts is only one aspect of qi gung. "To become a master, one also has to be a healer, a poet and a musician."

By the time he was 13, Vendrell had already begun healing people and was proficient in kung fu, a defensive form of martial arts, a skill that would serve him well in school. "I was severely dyslexic and couldn't read or write. I would hang out with the smart kids and protect them against bullies and they would do my homework," he said.

One fellow Vendrell knocked out wanted some revenge. Eight guys caught up to Vendrell on the street at night, but he beat them. As he caught his breath, a man came up to him and said he was a fight promoter and wanted to hire the 16-year-old to fight in matches.

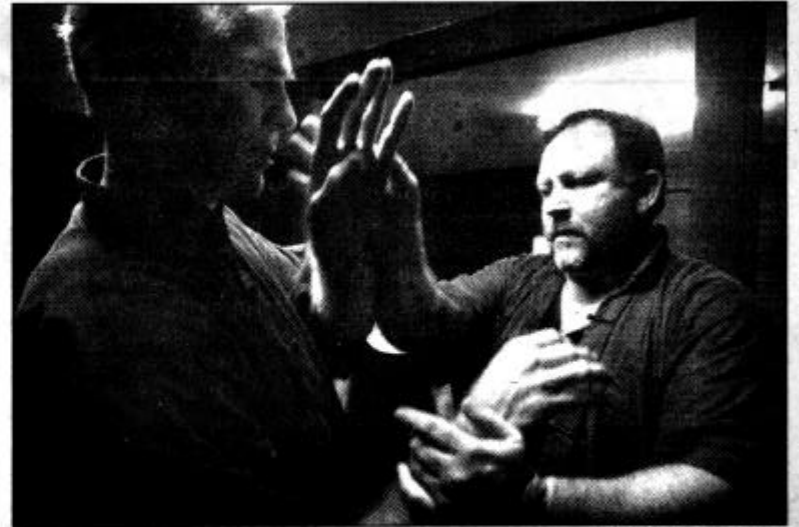
Vendrell recalls arriving in San Francisco for his first fight. "The guy picked me up and we drive to the wharf up to a dark building with no cars around," he said.

"Inside everyone was focused on the dog fight in the 20-by-20 chain link fence enclosure — two pit bulls were going at it," he said.

As Vendrell changed into his traditional kung fu "cloud uniform" he saw a guy 6-foot-8, 400 pounds. Vendrell was about 6 foot tall and only 165 pounds.

"We got locked into the cage together and someone announced the 'Mad Dog and Kung Fu Kid fight,' and said 'You all know the rules, there is none,'" he said.

"When I woke up in the car later that night, what I remembered was the guy running at me in slow motion. I broke his leg before he reached me and then just jumped on top of him and starting wailing," Vendrell said. The promoter said they had to knock Vendrell out to get him off the other guy.



—BARON SEKIYA—WHT

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Michael Vendrell (right) works with Larry Verble on techniques in a Kung Fu class.

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Vendrell said he fought in a cage every weekend for three years and never lost.

But he kept it a secret from his master, his parents and his friends. He increased his \$1,000 per-fight earnings ten-fold by betting on himself. "With my small size I would get good odds. I was a young kid earning \$10,000 a night. Once I started getting known I would change my appearance for each bout," he said.

Vendrell opened a school, married and drove trucks for the movie industry to earn more money for his growing family. He worked for the "Barnaby Jones" television show when its star, Buddy Ebsen, was diagnosed with phlebitis and was facing amputation. Vendrell was given a week to see what he could do to save the leg. Ebsen, now 98, still has both his legs.

In gratitude, Ebsen took the 20-year-old Vendrell on as a protégé, eventually making him a stunt coordinator. Vendrell has since worked in more than 100 movies and television series, coordinating stunts or working as a stunt double for actors like Jack Nicholson, Sean Connery, Timothy Dalton and Dan Ackroyd, who nicknamed Vendrell, "Moses" after Vendrell once put Ackroyd's back into place.

Vendrell was fight coordinator for David Carradine during the second "Kung Fu" series, and taught martial arts to Brandon Lee, Arnold Schwarzenegger, Michael Landon and Pat Morita.

He became a popular figure on the set with as many as 40 people waiting for an adjustment.

A couple years ago, Vendrell was making adjustments and talking about playing video games. One of the monster costume makers from across the set said, "You're not married are you or you wouldn't be able to play games all the time." He looked at her and said, "You have a headache don't you?"

As he adjusted her neck, Vendrell realized he had met his new wife. The couple married on a Maui beach 99 days later.

They had visited Hawaii many times, separately and together, but Vendrell had never been to Hawaii Island until last Christmas.

Stephanie had been here several times and encouraged a visit. "As soon as I got off the ramp I knew that 'this was home,'" Vendrell said. "We'd planned to move here

in five years, but just couldn't stay away from Kona." They moved in August with thoughts of staying involved in stunt coordination with infrequent flights back to Los Angeles, but all that changed Sept. 11.

Vendrell is back doing what he loves to do best — teaching kung fu and healing with qi gung treatments.

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Michael Vendrell leads his martial arts class, including Chris Vrehaut (left) and Nick Novick (right), in some arm movements.

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