

## THE SENSEI

It was my pleasure and honor to be a co-producer and assistant stunt coordinator on “The Sensei”. I can remember sitting in Diana and Ron’s kitchen many years ago hearing the pitch for this wonderful film. Diana had explained that she was inspired to tell this story because of real life people she knew who had been affected both directly and indirectly by the Aids virus. She was especially reminiscent of Gilbert Johnson, a straight man who had contracted the disease. Mr. Johnson was involved with martial arts publications, one of which is the amazing “Tao of Jeet Kune Do”, which he helped compile along with Linda Lee and Dan Inosanto after Bruce’s death. She expressed Mr. Johnson’s journey to me in a very heartfelt way. She was totally connected and in tune with the situation. She was so impressed that in his final days Mr. Johnson stood side by side with the gay community as an activist. She also explained that the hate crime resulting in the death of Matthew Shephard in Wyoming in 1998 also served as an inspiration to try and break down the barriers of hatred that seems to be prevalent in our society.



Mark Grove, Diana Lee  
Inosanto and Ron Balicki  
on set of “The Sensei”

You must understand, I am a martial artist, an action film buff, and a filmmaker myself. I like to tell escapist stories of heroes and villains fighting one another for dominance of the world. But Diana got to me. Her battle was bigger than any story I had ever come up with. Her hero was not a muscle bound, gun toting super soldier. Her heroes were a young boy facing his demons and a strong woman dedicated to standing up for what is right. Her villains did not walk into rooms in ominous black cloaks, they were people, everyday people, who were armed with disinformation, unfair judgment, and hatred. Although this was not the type of film I would generally choose to pursue, she had me hooked.

I have to say it was very illuminating. Here is a

woman who is an amazing martial artist, the daughter of the legendary Dan Inosanto, an insider in the Bruce Lee world, and married to Ron Balicki, who in my opinion is one of the most skilled martial artists in the world that also happens to be an amazing fight/stunt coordinator. You would think with these connections Diana would create an action-vehicle for herself that could, and probably would, make her a top female action star. But no. She was motivated to tell a story that needed to be told. The reason I said this was illuminating was not only because of her egoless dedication to a cause that every person can learn from, but the fact that by telling a story with this subject matter, she risked alienating herself in a world that is, unfortunately, still very homophobic.

When we decided to shoot the film in my home state of Colorado, the process began to find the locations and hire the actors. We held the initial casting at my studio. The talent in Colorado came out in droves and I was happy to see the actors embrace the content of the script with open arms. I wish I could say the same for every aspect of the pre-production, but I can’t. We ran into problems with the school board that represented the high school we were going to use. After they learned that the lead male was gay and that hate-violence was utilized in the film, they panicked. They pulled their school from the project in a buzz that was covered widely by the media. We could not seem to make them understand that the film was about tolerance and acceptance...but in order to address the problem, the audience needed to see the violence. In the end, we ended up shooting the scenes at South High School in Denver, which was not only a great location, it was also where I personally went to high school...so it was sort of nostalgic.

Since the film took place in a small town in the 1980's, we decided to shoot the primary scenes in Sterling, Colorado. Again, this was no easy task. I had to meet with the town council to discuss our ability to shoot there. It was very strange. It was not unlike the scene from the film "Footloose" where Kevin Bacon had to stand before the town elders and make his plea to allow the high school students to hold a dance. I had to convey the concept of the film to the same type of people. Most were very stone faced and I could not tell if I was getting through them. But a few days later they gave their permission to shoot there. Mission accomplished.



Mark Grove, Louis Mandylor, Diana Lee Inosanto, and Michael O'Laskey

I am very proud of Diana Lee Inosanto and Ron Balicki. Like real fighters, they did not take on an opponent that could be easily defeated. They chose to face a foe that would challenge every aspect of their being. This indomitable spirit is their gift. When the smoke settles, they will be victorious is spreading an amazing message.