



"The Dungeon Ladies" with 2012 Olympic hopeful Alex Love (center, front) and instructor Deanne Tolley (center, rear)

Welcome to the Dungeon

by Claudia Robinson

Do not let the name or the unassuming exterior of the Dungeon mislead you.

One step in to its 3-room, 3,600 square foot space, and any misconceptions about what a Mixed Martial Arts studio is "supposed" to resemble will be expunged. Bare bones it may be, offering only what its students need, but to the women who train under its meticulously immaculate tin roof, it's everything it should be and more.

The Dungeon began as a sort of "men only" private fight club in 1997, in the basement of owners John and Rosanna Burke's home. To say it has "evolved" would be an understatement. What it once was bears no resemblance to what it is now.

However, since its inception the Dungeon has possessed one unaltered core tenet: a family-like atmosphere filled with trainers and trainees with a like-minded mission to work hard, have fun and support one another. The support encompasses every and any capacity, and often times extends past the doors of the gym.

One of the greatest changes the Dungeon has seen over the years is in its clientele. With a top-heavy female-to-male ratio, the Dungeon's face has shifted from its former gritty, hardcore male base, to one that is predominantly female.

While there may be fewer active male fighters in the membership pool, those that remain share their talents and expertise with the newer members. The Dungeon offers myriad classes, night and day, for all age groups and abilities, making it one of the best hidden jewels on Cape Cod.



The Fight Camp ladies work the heavy bags

One of the newest, and most popular class is Women's Fight Camp, taught by Deanne Tolley.

"I was bored with conventional gyms and workouts," explains the tall, uber-fit, feisty brunette. "My husband Erik works around the

corner, mentioned an MMA gym and I walked in off the street to see what it had to offer. Obviously, it was the perfect fit."

Owner John Burke agrees. "From the onset, Deanne worked hard and demonstrated an amazing natural talent for kickboxing. I knew she was Instructor material. Along with her presence, as well as that of some other women seeking something unique, something special, it became obvious that there was a need for a safe place for women. A place where, along with getting into top physical condition and learning self-defense techniques, women could unload their personal limitations, inner conflict and daily stress."

In October 2011, the first female-only Fight Camp was born. "We had no expectations. Either it would be successful, or it wouldn't," Deanne says. "I spent the whole month prior chasing people down with fliers, using social networking and word-of-mouth to get the word out there."

When 15 women signed up, it was obvious John and Deanne were on to something. Spanning between the ages of 13 and 65, the newest group of women vocalized their needs, wants and reasons for being there.

"Domestic abuse, weight loss, self-esteem, fear of aging, self-empowerment, recovery from cancer, whatever. Every woman that comes through our door has a story. No one wants to be a victim and the Dungeon teaches everyone from the inside out, how not to be one. Ever," John explains.

"Women are amazing at visualization, so when I tell them to see someone coming at them, or to picture the heavy bag as the bad thing in their life, that person that hurt them, the pain, the cancer, they can do it. They attack it like they're going to kill it. They own it and demolish it. That's what brings them back, here they can unleash the demons and slay them with no repercussions."

"The women who walked in here that first day, with absolutely NO knowledge of boxing, no skill set, no previous conditioning, no idea what to expect aren't the same women that are here now," says John. "Physically and mentally, they're completely different people. I wouldn't want to get in the ring with any of them. They'd kill me." John's expression suggests he isn't kidding at all. "Deanne has created warriors out of these women and that's something they carry with them and use in all aspects of their day-to-day life. It's a tangible reformation that gets applied to everything they do.

"They're Dungeon strong."

With John's assistance, Deanne is now instructing over 8 classes a week comprised of over 30 women. The first Fight Camp team is on their 18th week of training. Classes consist of three elements: weights, core strengthening/cardio, and MMA style kickboxing. Done using the tabata technique (interval training requiring intense spurts of exercise with brief moments of rest done over a series of repetitions), the one-hour class, held three times a week, delivers a sweat soaked, literal butt kicking.

"My men couldn't do what the women do in that class. Hell, I couldn't do it," John confesses.

What is also evident is the genuine camaraderie between the women, and between the women and their Instructors. Easy banter, good-natured teasing, exaggerated (sometimes) victim noises and threats are tossed freely between Deanne and the women. John can often be found circling the room, correcting technique, growling encouragement, or enticing the women to hit harder and faster, with mischievous barbs meant to provoke ire.

The atmosphere bespeaks of people who respect, care for, and want the best for one another. "John doesn't measure success by the number of successful fighters he turns out of the Dungeon," explains Bill, John's father and partner in crime.

THE DUNGEON

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"He measures it by the personal success of our members. Whether it's self-esteem milestones, weight-loss, substance abuse recovery, or whatever. If by coming here, training hard, and wanting more, if that turns someone's life around for the better, makes them stronger, helps them walk taller, THAT is the true meaning of success. The rest is just a bonus."

One must not forget, however, that the Dungeon's roots are based on the successes of the many fighters that have left its concrete walls and made a mark on the MMA world with skills taught to them by John. His teaching skills are renowned, so much so that Alex Love, a top female boxer and 2012 Olympic hopeful, chose him as her conditioning trainer, traveling all the way from Spokane, Washington for his guidance.

Upon being introduced to the fight camp ladies and watching them train, Alex was all praise. "I walked in and saw all these people with ponytails. It took me a second to understand that what I was seeing was an MMA gym filled with women, not just men. Watching them train, seeing them hit the bags, it's awesome. These ladies are the new wave. They're starting something here. The

Dungeon is changing lives."

And she's right.

Every day, every class, Deanne and John and the myriad other instructors who offer their skills and guidance are doing just that. Changing lives, offering hope, defining dreams, bettering people.

For the women that attend, admitting to being a member of the Dungeon comes with a certain sense of pride and accomplishment. The passion and exuberance for what it has done for them in all areas of their lives is highly contagious. At any given class there is, more often than not, a new face, or two, a friend, a family member, or a co-worker. They have witnessed the transformation of another woman and been inspired.

That is the defining difference between the Dungeon and other gyms. It's a community of women (and men) intent on self-improvement, self-empowerment and self-accomplishment. It's about fostering bonds and relationships between all genders, ages and walks of life based on the commonality of one singular aspiration for uniquely defined success – both of their own, as well as that of their fellow members. Success that is fought for and eventually earned, with blood and sweat, hard work and determination.

After all, as the Dungeon's motto attests, victory without sacrifice has no meaning.



Claudia Robinson lives on Cape Cod with her husband Paul, two children and many fur babies. She pursues her passion for kickboxing, fitness and motorcycles in between being a full-time mom and aspiring writer. She is also a frequent book reviewer for www.LuxuryReading.com.

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