Josh Fernandez
Interview by Sue Staats

In *The Hands that Crafted The Bomb*, Josh Fernandez has written a book that's compelling, engaging, contradictory. You can't put it down, although sometimes you want to throw it across the room.

But you'll always pick it up again, because this is a guy who thinks, who experiences, whose voice urges you to pay attention, do something. Act! he says.

It's the kind of book that makes you want to stop reading, just for a minute, and talk about what you've just read — not with your husband or a friend, but with the writer himself.

In the segment you'll hear at Stories on Stage Sacramento, you'll learn a bit about Josh's childhood and the events that shaped him. But the whole book just explodes beyond that. It's the story of a complicated man filled with contradictions, incandescent with rage and with hope and the desire to fight, and he challenges you to agree with him. You want to argue with him, make him clarify something, expand on what he's written.

And I couldn't resist that in this interview. Here's a little of what I mean…

Edited for length and clarity.

Sue: Josh, in your book, there's a segment about the free martial arts classes you run, classes taught by a guy who's doing serious training at a gym. You say this:

> *We're essentially cheating, sidestepping the pricey gym memberships, like when students buy papers online to get through college*.

I want to argue with you about this. Because buying papers *is* cheating, because they're not doing the work. Teaching what you've learned, to make a free class possible? That's sharing. I don't agree that it's cheating.

Josh: Yeah, well, there's this ethos in the martial arts community about joining gyms and learning from professionals and paying the fees and doing all of the right things in the right order in the right steps. And it's sort of frowned upon to go outside of that structure. So, in that sense, it really is sort of cheating. People really frown on you for doing DIY type of stuff when it comes to martial arts training.

Sue: Do they? Is it that they're afraid you might learn something wrong or outside the way it's supposed to be? Or that you're taking money away from them?

Josh: I think it's all of those things. There's a real adherence to tradition. And I never kind of grew up in that. For me, it was like the punk rock community, where everything was do-it-yourself, you know what I mean? Like (choosing) music, putting shows together and things like that. So, it seemed like a no-brainer for me to do this for the community and bring in people who would be willing to teach for free, just like I would put together a punk rock show. And the contrast between that and what you're supposed to do is quite different.

Sue: Here's another place where I wanted you to explain yourself. It's early in the book and it's about a different kind of fighting — you're fighting Folsom Lake College's effort to fire you.

> *When I interviewed for this job, I talked about how I was perfectly fit to teach. All my flaws, my struggle to maintain sanity in a world whose premise I reject, gave me insight. The interview panel nodded their heads at the idea of a good teacher but a flawed man, until the reality of a flawed man entered their institution. … So many times, I've thought, This job isn't for me. Which is probably why I took it, part of a sick obsession with making the wrong choices. Maybe my stepdad is right about me. Maybe my mom is right about me. And the administrators. I'm no good. A perpetual maker of bad choices. An eternal self-destructor. It is me. I am the fucked-up man.*

How does this fucked-up man function? Does he become less fucked-up with time? Or does he become more like his father?

Josh: That's such a good question. It's sort of the premise of this book, right? Like, there's this kid who just sees and experiences all these things and isn't quite sure what to do with all this rage that's being built up from this life. And it's the mission in my life to figure out, like, how do I harness all this rage? And where do I put it? Really, I think what I've been trying to do is take this rage and put it into things that make sense for me and for the world. And so instead of exploding all the time, I started writing. Instead of exploding all the time, I started doing martial arts. Instead of exploding all the time, I started running. Instead of exploding all the time, I turn all that rage into love and give it to my family.

Sue: I was going to ask if you thought you had achieved control over the rage, but it sounds like you've figured it out.

Josh: Yeah, absolutely. One of my students in the prison (Fernandez teaches creative writing at Mule Creek State Prison in Ione in an outreach program through Folsom Lake College) last night asked me why I wasn't a Christian, why didn't I have some sort of religion. We were talking about religion and faith and Christianity and things like that. And I just told him, I think I have enough right now. I really feel like I have everything I've ever wanted and more. And I always said, when I was younger, if I can ever pull myself together, I'm going to use all my strength to help other people. And now that I can do that, I feel really fulfilled and content.

Sue: I bet it's something you didn't think you'd have 20 years ago.

Josh: No, not even close. Not even close. And I didn't think I would be alive. I'm 48 years old now and I didn't think I would be alive to see this day at all.

Sue: (after a pause to let that sink in) Now, here's another part of the book where I thought, dang, I'd like to call him up about this. It's from one of the other chapters about your boyhood.

> *I had a keen sense of right and wrong from an early age and simply preferred to do the wrong thing. The world was more fun that way. I wanted to see what would happen. The threat of trouble was a precursor to the electric current, to sexual intercourse, the closest sensation I had to arousal, like the first time I crafted a joint out of oregano.*

Josh: I remember the feeling still. It's like this real thrill of just doing the wrong thing, or doing something I knew wasn't right or people didn't want me to do. I would just go straight toward that thing and do it just because I wanted to. I felt this real exhilaration. But, you know, I've crafted this life very carefully. Just thinking about doing stuff like I used to makes me nervous that everything might come apart, you know, and I don't want that. It's like a house of cards. I know how delicate everything is. And I know that it could just come crumbling down. So, I really don't want to ruin any of it, you know?

Sue: I can see it's a hard-won thing you don't want to lose. But you've been involved in Antifa, and in one of the chapters about that you write this:

> *Trump was elected as a way for Black, Brown, and queer people to find strength in exercise and learn how to defend ourselves as the world turns angrier in the last gasp of white supremacy.*

Do you really believe that white supremacy is in its last gasp?

Josh: There's a part of me that's so naïve, that I really believe in, and that's movements. And I really believe in the strength of young people. Just having kids and teaching, I see young people so much. And I see their joy and I see their hope. And I see their love for each other. And I see the way they treat each other now. And I really had this hope that all these generations with all these archaic views and racist notions are dying out. Maybe that's a naive way to think, but there's part of me that's still a little kid full of wonder and hope. I believe that some of the things that I have in my life are there only because I thought them into existence. And so, maybe this is me thinking things into existence, like it will happen.

Sue: Let's hope! Speaking of kids, there are several wonderful chapters where you write about your children. I was taken by a paragraph where you're watching your six-year-old son, who was sporting a green mohawk haircut in his martial arts class, and he's interacting with the other students.

> *… then starts a conversation with them. He's hungry for humanity, and his odd hair is just one entry point into his exploration. He understands the power of his appearance, and he uses it to connect himself to the world*

You have a really remarkable connection and insight into your children. I'm wondering what accounts for this.

Josh: My kids are just so fascinating to me. When I knew we were going to have a boy, I was really worried. Because I wanted a girl at first, just because I don't know how to do any, like, manly things. I'm not a baseball guy. Soccer? Sports? Nope. And I don't know how to fix anything. So maybe I'm not a good role model. I had all these weird things going through my head. But as I thought about it, I thought, this doesn't matter at all. It's just love. And we'll figure out what to do. And Ezra was just so curious and so wonderful and added something to our lives that we never even knew we were missing. We were both so *taken* by him. And when our daughter came along, it was the same thing. We just love our kids and we want them to be happy. And we also want them to be kind. And everything else, I feel, will fall into place. Those are our rules for the house.

Sue: You don't need many rules and those are good ones. Here's another place in the book that had me reaching for the phone. It's from one of the chapters about the attempt of Folsom Lake College to fire you. You're being interviewed by administrators and realizing that they really want to get rid of you.

> *If they did fire me, a part of me in the back of my mind would say, Yeah, sure, I get it. It's a terrible feeling knowing my history, knowing I'm a sinister piece of shit, but also knowing that I'm innocent of this one thing. … Their accusation that I'm leading students to commit violence at protests is entirely made up. Yet I still feel like I need to lie. Maybe it's the nature of being a scumbag—a juvenile delinquent turned adult delinquent.*

When I read this, I thought, Josh really has remarkable clarity about himself and what makes him tick. Did you realize all this as you were writing it? Or is this something you'd worked out before you put it down on paper?

Josh: I think the writing process really helped me clarify a lot of things. When I first started writing around 2018, after this investigation took place, it wasn't for a book, it was just because I was so filled with rage. And I knew that writing would help me relieve some of that rage. The writing I did then was really mean toward the people who were doing the investigation — I was damning them all. It was therapeutic in a way. But when I started writing the book, I really had to dig deep and think about all the sides involved, the investigators. I really had to try to see it through their eyes, to see what they were seeing.

Sue: I'd like to talk a bit about the structure of the book, which frankly I found a little perplexing. If I didn't live in Sacramento and wasn't familiar with some of the locations you mention, I would have had a hard time following it. There's only one consistent thread, which is the investigation, and otherwise, nothing seems to really be in sequence. It's like one event reminds you of another event and then something else pops in that doesn't seem related. And sometimes, even the chapter headings don't have much to do with what's in the chapter. Did this structure just kind of happen? Or did you want it this way for a reason?

Josh: Kind of both, to be honest. I wanted there to be a sense of disarray and chaos because this is how my mind works. There's not a lot that makes sense. There are flashes of things. When I think of my past, I think of everything out of order and I'll get times wrong, I'll get ages wrong. I'll get the place I lived wrong. Everything is just messy in there. And, you know, one thing will remind me of another thing. Even during the investigation, when I was being asked questions, I would think back to my childhood and had to fight myself not to tell a story that was completely irrelevant to the question.

Sue: I know, the story just wants to pop out.

Josh: Absolutely, yeah, and it isn't the point, right?

Sue: Did your editor and publisher try to talk you out of this sort of chaotic structure? Or did they understand that it was a reflection of how you think?

Josh: My first editor talked me out of a lot of stuff. She had some great structural edits, gave me some great ideas and rearranged a bunch of stuff, but she was really good about understanding the structure of the book. And then the second editor didn't really have any problems with it. They understood what it was supposed to be and left it.

Sue: Clearly the right decision. You've got a lot to stay about institutions and not much of it is complimentary. As you see it, most, if not all, of them are incompetent and staffed by idiots, and especially at your college. And yet there's this lovely part about your experience attending Sacramento City College, where faculty and staff were incredibly supportive and caring to you. So, what are you saying? Are institutions bad places with some good people or good places with some bad apples that you just happened to run into?

Josh: I think the answer is that I'm big on people. I love people. And I think people have the ability to do amazing things. What I'm not big on is institutions, any institution. Once the corporate aspect comes into play, and bigger things such as money and business models, that's when I think people lose their humanity. They're trying to run these businesses. And even though colleges are institutions of higher

learning, they're still institutions and there's still a bottom line. A lot of the administrators are really just speaking to the bottom line rather than speaking to the humanity of the people.

Sue: Have you seen this happen to faculty when they begin moving up in the administration?

Josh: At first, they try as hard as they can to retain their humanity, but they're in a tough spot. They're kind of dealing with the faculty, but they're also dealing with the higher-ups. And usually the higher-ups are the ones who win because they're the ones who sign the paycheck.

Sue: Can we talk about tattoos? You mentioned in the book that you're heavily tattooed. What do tattoos mean to you and when did you began collecting them?

Josh: I think my first tattoo was when I was 17 and I got a Cowardly Lion on my calf, and I just kept getting them. I like them for a lot of reasons. One, I like how they look. Two, I like that they sort of keep me out of jobs that I don't want. For instance, I'll never get a job in retail. And I just like what they represent and that they sort of set me apart. Some people view them as trashy or tacky, but I kind of like setting myself apart a little bit.

Sue: Do your kids like looking at them?

Josh: They don't even notice them.

Sue: Oh, come on. If my dad had pictures all over his body, I'd be looking at them!

Josh: I know, it's weird, they don't care.

Sue: Maybe it's just a generational difference! More than once in the book you mention that teaching is the one thing you feel cut out for. What's the most rewarding teaching you do?

Josh: Lately, it's been in the prison system. I teach half of my load in the prison system. And you know, prisoners just have this complete lack of humanity. They're treated like animals. So, when they get to come into a college classroom and learn about writing, they are so excited. And they are so grateful and so happy. Every time I go in, there's this real connection. It's probably one of the most human experiences I've ever had as a teacher because in the prison, everything is stripped down and everything is really raw. And some of the writing that happens in there is just incredible.

Sue: Who did you write this book for?

Josh: Another good question. I wrote it for outsider youth. I wrote the book that I would have wanted to read when I was a 16-year-old crazy person. I wrote it for the kid who's just lost and full of rage and full of anger. The boy who's just out of control. I'm hoping that the book won't make them more out of control! But when I wrote it, that was who I had in mind. That's how I got through the book.

Sue: There's a lot of rough language and hard living and drugs and homelessness and tough topics in this book, and my last question is this: There was an interview you did with the Sacramento News & Review last year where you said that the book went through a sensitivity reading. Here's the quote:

> *My book went through a sensitivity reading. That's what happens with books now, they go through sensitivity readings. And my book did not pass the test. They send you back a list of all the things that could be triggering to people.*

So, did you make the changes they suggested?

Josh: I kind of knew what they were going to say. The suggestions were a huge list of phrases and words. A lot of stuff in the book was just not for sensitive ears. And I ended up making the decision not to change anything. I just left it all in. My editor said, “When people read this book, they’re not going to be happy with you.” So, I listened to that and I thought, well, that's not necessarily a bad thing. You know what I mean? I want people to engage with the reading, even if they're having trouble with it or if they're angry at the author. I think that’s a good conversation. So, I just left all that stuff in and we're gonna see how it falls.

Sue: Thank you, Josh.

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