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“How I am impacting my community.”

My father and my mother started a Brazilian Jiu Jitsu academy back in 2008. They both hold significant rank in the martial art and have studied the art of self-defense for just under two decades. I was raised in the intricate martial art world and learned self-defense since I was just a small child. I started martial arts at 4 and that alone would shape who I am now at almost 18. From an early age, I spent countless hours training and grappling with them and spent most nights and weekends in the academy. I grew up with Grand Masters and Masters of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu staying with us in our home becoming extended members of our family since I was a small child. These men are the elite founding fathers of the art of Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. My parents were their affiliates here in Michigan.

Brazilian Jiu Jitsu differs in some fundamental ways from all other related systems. Other systems were originally designed as powerful systems that also included a sportive component. Presently, the emphasis in most academies is on sport competition. My parents decided early on that their focus would purely remain on the self-defense aspect. This came to shape me in ways that would help the community that we were to grow a part of.

I always felt protective growing up at school of the underdogs. These are the kids that were picked on and bullied. I would always find myself in situations where I would get involved if I saw someone being unkind or cruel to other peers whether I knew their name or not. I would stick up for them and verbalize that I was not afraid to stick up for myself if I had to and I was willing to fight. I did not want to do that. I would if the harassment continued. My parents and Grand masters always taught me the three T's: Talk, Tell and Tackle. This shaped my thinking and my confidence.

The rise in youth suicides has prompted schools to be more proactive in the fight against bullying. But schools can only do so much. My family believes "bullyproofing" starts at home. Building on our experience in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, my family business, we created Bullyproof, a youth confidence and character development free community program to ensure that children in our community around us never become a victim of this pervasive problem. These kids feel their world is crashing down inside of them, and they desperately need help. My mother and father and I decided to take community action in a last-ditch effort to restore these kids confidence and help them regain control of their life. We began a community wide free kids' group jujitsu class with special attention in bullyproofing these kids. Some of these kids come so traumatized that they wouldn't interact with other children. Realizing what was at stake, I told my parents that I would privately train with them until we could bolster their confidence and then ease them in to group classes.

I will never forget my first experience in this endeavor. I started out with a little boy named Conner. He stood in the middle of the private training room with his head down. His mom watched intently from the corner. Conner wouldn't talk to me, so I grabbed him and gently started playing with him like my father did with me when I was a child. At first it was like grappling with a lifeless rag doll as I moved his arms and legs for him. Even though I was responsible for all his movements, I made sure he was still "winning" the game. At one point, he put his hand out for balance at just the right time, and I lavishly praised his effort. Eager for more, he began to initiate the simple movements I had subliminally introduced to him. Within a few minutes, Conner cracked a begrudging smile, and before the class was over he was laughing aloud. More significantly, he didn't realize that he was learning essential self-defense techniques that would enable him to stand up for himself the next time he had to face the bully. By the end the first lesson, Conner and I had become friends. I looked over to his mother, and her quiet tears of joy acknowledged that the transformation had begun.

Conner went home that day a different kid than when he came in. We met daily for one week. At the end of the fifth session, Conner unexpectedly burst out with the details of the harassment he had endured at the hands of the bully. The key that released his pent-up fears and frustrations was having the confidence to face his tormentor. Conner no longer feared the other child. The next week, he joined the group classes where he made lots of new friends. Most importantly, Conner went back to school and, as expected, never again had any problems with the bully.

Bullying is the act of physically, verbally or psychologically intimidating another person and is commonplace among children, and fear is the source of the bully's power. Without inducing fear in a victim, bullies have no power advantage. They seek victims who lack self-confidence so they can exploit their weaknesses and break their spirit. The only reliable way to stop bullies is to confront them. Fifty percent of the time, if you just say no to a bully, they'll stop. However we still needed to teach kids how to protect their space, how to be firm and how not to be a victim. However, that's often easier said than done.

Children's inability to stand up to bullies is rooted in profound fear for their personal safety. The victims know they must confront the bullies and would like nothing more than to stand up to them. But, they simply can't follow through for fear of the physical harm that backs the bullies' actions. And, therein lies the challenge how do you instill in victims of bullying the confidence to face the tormentors, look them in the eyes and back them down? The answer is simple teach the victims to defend themselves against physical attack, and the rest will follow.

I was able to "bullyproof" Conner quickly and effectively by teaching him a few simple self-defense techniques. After just five lessons, he had so much confidence in the techniques and his reflexes that he no longer feared getting hurt by the bully. Now that he was fearless, he could walk strong. When he returned to school, the bully must have sensed Conner's newfound confidence because the harassment came to a screeching halt.

Martial artists will tell you that the best prepared students also tend to be the least likely to find themselves in a fight. Predators look for signs of weakness when selecting victims. People who have the confidence to deal with physical aggression not only possess technical skills for neutralizing an attack, but also exude confidence in their bearing and mannerisms. These people are both less likely to be attacked and, interestingly, are less prone to initiate a fight because they have nothing to prove. This especially applies to children during their vulnerable formative years. For these reasons, we decided to keep the Bullyproof community project going and I am proud to be a part of it.

Most martial arts programs discourage fighting among students. A student who initiates a fight not to mention bullying can be expelled from the training. Some self-defense systems rely on striking the attacker; however, this method provides no way to control the level of violence: "You punch me, and I'll punch you harder. You push me, and I'll kick you in the head." While a strike may have its place in a life threatening street fight, it has no place on the playground and will always do more harm than good. Essentially, you're fighting fire with fire. It's unnecessarily violent and rightfully unacceptable to school authorities. It can even turn victims into bullies.

Sooner or later, most children will be the target of some form of harassment verbal, physical or psychological. We can't control how other people will treat children, but we can control and prepare how these children respond.

It's all about self-confidence. We have helped shape this self-confidence in over 200 children age 4-12 in our Bullyproof community project over the last 3 years. To give these 200 children self-confidence, rooted in the knowledge that no other kid can harm or intimidate them, is a priceless gift with the potential to shape their entire lives. I am proud to be a part of that process and give most of my free time to this community project with my parents. There are so many ways to get involved in your community, by getting involved in your community you can change the lives of many people and the environment around you.