

Hello everyone,

Thank you for sharing your time and thought with me. I know this is attached to a fundraiser, and we are hoping you can help financially, but more importantly this is about honoring our time as I look into a future that has changed drastically in the last half-year. As many of you know, I suffered a severe neck injury that required emergency surgery and from which I am now recovering. What you may not know is how frightening and challenging this has been, and what this means for me and my family in the grander scheme. I'll start here with the simple things, the business side of things pertinent to this fundraiser. Then, for those with the time and interest, I'll step back into a brief discussion of what Jiu-Jitsu has meant for me over the course of my life. At the least, I want to you understand the strain this injury has caused our family. But further, I want to share on a deeper level about my relationship with Jiu-Jitsu (and all of you by proxy). I imagine many you will relate to pieces of my story – impacts of injuries, companionship and camaraderie, hopes, and loss.

Toward the end of last November, I was attending Sunday morning open mat here at 5 Rings Jiu-Jitsu (5RJJ). The class was getting pretty big in size and this day we had several out-of-state visitors. One of these was a fellow Purple Belt, a large man who nearly doubled my weight in size. I remember him as extremely friendly and a pleasure to grapple with. I was quicker and more agile than him but confounded by his size. One of his arms was stronger than both of mine. I was able to obtain back-control but unable to apply any submission with my arms. With him in a kneeling position, I stepped over his right shoulder and locked a triangle with his left arm. With his superior strength, he was able to stand from there with me on his shoulders. Without pausing to consider the dynamics of his weight from a top position, I tipped myself forward into an inverted position, maintaining control of his left arm with both of my arms, balancing on my head. I have a lot of fun using inverted positions and do this all the time. In most scenarios I can mitigate any risk through strength and agility. In this scenario, however, I was unprepared for the forces he could create through his combined strength and body weight. By the

time I realized my predicament, he was already compressing me and folding my head back and to the left, and I was unable to move. I yelled “stop” as soon as I could, but it wasn’t quick enough.

At the time, I thought I was okay. I laid on the mat for five or ten minutes focusing on my body feelings, and everything seemed fine. Eventually I got up and called it a day. Within a couple of days, I had forgotten the event as nothing seemed amiss. I continued attending the Sunday open mat every week. It did begin to feel as though I had pulled a muscle under my left shoulder-blade, but those muscles are sore most of the time and I thought little of it. As long as I jogged regularly it seemed to stay loose, and the pain was just an irritant. On a couple of occasions, I missed several consecutive days of jogging and the pain became quite sharp. On these times, I went in for massages, which helped a little. Overall, I felt strong and healthy and figured this would eventually resolve.

It continued thus through December and into the new year. At the beginning of February, we had a family reunion vacation up in the mountains. I felt great for the entire trip – playing table tennis, hiking, running, and sledding. I actually forgot my shoulder was even a problem. When I returned to work on Monday, the injury came back with a vengeance. It became painful to use my left arm and I began experiencing numbness in my fingers. I took a bunch of Ibuprofen and pushed on. Tuesday morning, I had to drive to Portland for a meeting. The pain was excruciating on my left side and prevented me from using my left arm to steer. Again, I took a bunch of Ibuprofen and pushed on. On Wednesday (February 7th) the pain seemed to abate to a mild irritant and caused little trouble at work. I assumed it had been a simple flare-up. I came home from work, to a typical evening. I changed, ate dinner, then went upstairs to play video games with my son (Ben). While playing, my neck began feeling stiff and pressured, like it needed to be popped. I came down and asked my new wife (married 12/21/17), Mae, to walk on my back. I don’t know what happened or why it happened at that moment. I never made it down for her to walk on me. I made it halfway to a kneeling position and my body seized in pain. I couldn’t move. Couldn’t stand back up or sit down, or turn, or move period. It felt like someone had stabbed my neck, at the top of my left trapezius. I was crying from pain and I couldn’t do

anything. I don't know that I can accurately describe the feeling of utter helplessness. The smallest movement felt like being stabbed again. With my wife's help and more tears than I've shed since I was a child, over the course of an hour I was able to stand back up.

My left arm was stuck straight out and radiating pain and my left ear was glued to my shoulder. I couldn't lift my head straight – it simply didn't work, and I couldn't put my arm down because it shot pain like being stabbed again. My wife, who was just learning how to drive, took me to the emergency room. They thought it was a shoulder injury and took x-rays but found nothing. They gave me muscle relaxers and ibuprofen, a release from work through the next Monday, and sent me home. My condition did not improve, although the valium and Flexeril did allow me to sleep. Getting out of bed was another story. It would take up to an hour for me to get out of bed, with my wife's help. Again, any movement felt like being stabbed in the neck. The numbness in my fingers became increasingly pronounced and extended up the top of my forearm and along my tricep. At my emergency room follow-up appointment on the next Monday, the medical provider I saw had previously worked in a spine center for a number of years and instantly recognized what was happening. She extended my work release for another week and got me scheduled for an MRI that Friday evening with an immediately following appointment with my primary care doctor.

The MRI showed the disc at C6-C7 had been pressed out of the joint like toothpaste and was compressing my spinal cord almost flat. My doctor had never seen anything like it and sent an urgent referral to orthopedic surgery for a consult. I was able to get an appointment with them a week-and-a-half later. When the surgeon came in and pulled up my MRI imaging, he took a double take and asked whether or not I was able to walk. He was surprised that I was not paralyzed and said that if he could, he would perform surgery that day. That is a frightening thing to hear a surgeon say, and it really scared me. He was able to rearrange some patients and got me in to surgery 3 days later (March 2nd). They removed the herniated disc, inserted a piece of cadaver bone, and screwed a metal plate over the joint to fuse it.

At the time I went into surgery, I had already been out of work for almost 4 weeks. My wife doesn't work outside the home, which makes us dependent on my income. Luckily, I have a short-term disability insurance policy that pays me at 65% of my usual wages, and that kicked in following a 29-day waiting period. Financially, this has been a major hit, but with the initial fundraising, it has been enough for us to scrape by. My spring has been frustratingly sedentary, as I was essentially on bedrest. Because they had to insert a piece of cadaver bone, I had to wait 3-months before I could begin any physical therapy due to the length of time it takes for bone to heal. Had I caused any stress to the area before sufficient bone growth and healing had taken place, it would have caused micro-fracturing within the bones that would permanently compromise its integrity. When I met with my surgeon for 3-month post-operative follow-up and x-ray imaging, he cleared me to begin physical therapy, stating that he was releasing me from the restrictions from movement and strain on the area. My disability insurance provider interpreted this as me no longer having any disability and capable of returning to work full-time. Consequently, and despite submitting musculoskeletal reports on my condition and my physical therapy evaluation clearly demonstrating my functional deficits and physical limitations, my disability provider closed my case and terminated all financial support as of June 11th. I have appealed this decision, but it is a minimum of 45-days and as much as 120-days for them to complete their case review and no guarantee of winning my appeal.

I returned to work at the beginning of the July at a minimal schedule. The first week of July I worked two 4-hour shifts. My return to work transition grows at the rate of 4-hours per week until I am back to fulltime. While this does provide a small but increasing income, it was 3 weeks with no income and it will be another 6 weeks until I am back to fulltime. We have already received so much assistance and generosity, without which we would've lost our home and had to move. It has been such an honor to be a part of the Jiu-Jitsu community, and it truly feels like the biggest loss I've ever suffered. My doctors have all told me I will never grapple again. I am not at a place yet where I can consider the idea of "forever," so I have set myself a 2-year break for recovery and healing. Once I am cleared from my

physical therapist, I plan to begin regular Yoga classes to regain my strength and relationship with my body. For the first time in my life I have anxiety – I don't trust my neck. This will take time to work through. Once I become more mobile and agile, I am hoping to begin dance classes with my wife. I see it as an opportunity to be physically active in tandem with another person (what I love most about Jiu-Jitsu) while not needing to worry about placing my neck in danger.

Since I was a kid, I always wanted to train martial arts. I think I started asking my parents about it in the third grade, but they always said “no.” We couldn't afford it, and the nearest class was over 20 miles away. When I entered adolescence, things weren't so easy for me. My family relationships were difficult at best (although they're pretty great now) and around my 14th birthday I began smoking marijuana and drinking. I used each of these a few times over the next 2 months, and then my parents had me removed from my home for being “out of parental control.” I was entered into the “juvenile justice” system, placed on probation, and moved into foster care. Over the next 10 months, I had a pretty traumatic run through 9 foster homes. In all of the homes, I was denied any free time and required to either be in school or in my bedroom. I was in a home where cocaine was sold, and my foster dad punched me across a room. In another home I was forced to stay in a toddler “racecar” bed except to eat and use the bathroom. There was a biker guy who would sit in my room and tell me he was going to kill me if I moved. In all the homes, food was used as a source of control – I would be denied meals or access to food and water. I would regularly be picked up by my probation officer and taken to isolation in the juvenile detention center, for up to 3 weeks at a time, with never an explanation for why. After 10 months, I ran away but was caught 10 days later.

At that time, they couldn't find anymore foster homes to place me in, so they had me sentenced to 13 months in MacLaren (Juvenile Prison), with no criminal charges, and 6 days before my 15th birthday. I was able to get into one of their “camp programs” by claiming to be drug addicted. These programs were addiction treatment programs within the prison, which required each person to attend at

least 2 backpacking trips, and which provided an opportunity for early release after serving 4 months. I was successful in the program and at the timeline, and so was released with 9 months of parole and with the identity of an “addict” and a “convict.”

While I was on parole, my parents finally let me take Martial Arts classes. I joined the early Straight Blast Gym, in a small attic above a store in Keizer. I trained there for 5 or 6 months, being introduced to Kickboxing and Brazilian Jiu-Jitsu. I loved the training – how my body felt, my confidence, the chance to work on my identity. Unfortunately, my status in my small home town became very prescriptive. The people with whom I had initially experimented with marijuana and alcohol were happy to except me back into their group, and my reputation had gained considerably by going through MacLaren. So it was that on the day I completed my parole, a group of friends got together and we skipped out of class to get stoned and drunk. On that day, I dropped out of school, moved out of my parents’ home, and jumped headlong into addiction. I quit training and dedicated the vast majority of my time to smoking marijuana and drinking. Two-months later, I arranged with my dad to get my GED and start working for him as a construction laborer.

The following summer I was arrested twice for possession of marijuana and referred back to the juvenile justice system. I went to court just after my 17th birthday and was again remanded to the juvenile justice system. I sentenced to complete a 9-month residential treatment program. I went to 2 different programs, each for 2 months, then was transferred to another foster home. This time in foster care I was introduced to methamphetamines prior to being emancipated, 2-months before turning 18. I was homeless and quickly became addicted to meth, which was my life for the next year-and-a-half.

Eventually I was caught in the middle of a pretty crazy situation that involved guns placed against my head by friends and middle-of-the-night police interrogations. I was able to get in touch with some of my pre-methamphetamine friends, who moved me into their garage. I restarted construction work and, as soon as I could afford it, training at Straight Blast Gym (SBG). After a couple of months, I was able to rent a house with a couple of friends and still afford training at SBG, until they raised their

rates about 7-months later. I had to quit SBG but quickly found an Ed Parker Kenpo Karate class that was super cheap and had a bonus Jiu-Jitsu open mat on Fridays. I kept this up pretty much until I joined the USArmy Infantry Corp just after turning 21 years old. We had some brief Jiu-Jitsu classes in Basic Training that I got to take a small leadership role in. However, this was the end of Jiu-Jitsu for me for a number of years.

When I went in the military, I had what turned out to be a fantastical notion of what the life of an Infantry Soldier is. And, for that matter, what it means to be an Infantry Soldier. The Army Core Values, in which I found much meaning, were mostly a joke for the majority of Infantry Soldiers I met at my duty station in Germany. It turned out to be, by-and-large, small men with small problems. I did not fit in and often found myself ridiculed for my values. Needless to say, I avoided the Americans as much as I possibly could. And I found drugs that had previously made me feel good about bad situations. I got heavily into methamphetamine and ecstasy use, which ultimately led to an early discharge from the military. When I came home 2-years after enlisting, my addiction was pretty out-of-control and only got worse.

The culture around drug use in Germany is extremely social. Here in the United States, it's very paranoid and isolated. Which is exactly what my life became, in ever increasing amounts. I started off alright, got back into construction work within a few months, bought a truck, and rented a small house alone. Things went okay for about a year before they crumbled. I was trying to only use meth on the weekends, but it got the better of me. Even once I started using throughout the week again, I was still mostly able to manage my job and bills. Not forever though. I got into a relationship with a woman meth dealer (my son's mom), who was super abusive and liked to knock me out or leave me stranded somewhere. I lost my home shortly after she moved in and we wound up in a tent in the woods in the back of an Indian Reservation. For the next year-and-a-half, we lived in tents, squatted in abandoned houses, and lived in 5th wheel trailers in the woods with no electricity, water, or septic.

This ended when she became pregnant. I wanted to quit using meth – she didn't want to. We had a public argument about it, the police came, and I was arrested for felony possession of methamphetamine. Probably the best thing that could've happened for me at the time. I went to jail and had a legal wedge driven between me and her. I was released on probation on a conviction diversion program, with a "no-contact order" with her, and I was allowed to move back into my parents' home. I started working construction for my dad again, although my addiction continued. I would sneak out at night and go buy meth, and sneak back in just before my parents woke up. I really wanted to quit, but addiction is very strong. I continued using meth almost daily. Notably, and a testament to my desire to quit, I reported on myself for using meth to my probation officer every chance I got. This meant I was sanctioned back to jail numerous times over several months, eventually failing my diversion and being convicted for felony drug possession. Oddly enough, the drug use that led to the revocation of my diversion and subsequent conviction was the last time I used meth – March 17, 2007. My son was born 3 weeks later – April 6, 2007.

I completed residential and outpatient treatment, then volunteered at the treatment center as a mentor to help others trying to get off drugs. At the end of my first year in sobriety, I entered into my first semi-healthy relationship. She was active alcoholic but was a very fun person. Not abusive or anything else. She was acquainted with many of my healthy friends and things seemed to grow smoothly. About a year after she and I got together, a Jiu-Jitsu gym opened in our little town – Valor BJJ. I joined as soon as I found them, and BJJ became an integral part of my recovery program. I even used BJJ to help me quit cigarettes, 6 months later.

Toward the end of 2009, the economy tanked and construction work dried up. By this time, I was a Journeyman Tile-setter, for which the Oregon Employment Department listed an annual 16 job openings in the state. My chances of finding a job were nil. Thankfully, the Trade Act had been passed. Identified as a dislocated worker, I qualified for full unemployment benefits if I was enrolled in college full-time. They also dropped the job search requirement. I decided to try going to college to be a Drug

and Alcohol counselor. I excelled in school beyond anything I ever could have imagined and absolutely loved the work in my practicum as an Addictions Counselor. Throughout my life I have received so much terrible care from “would-be helpers” – probation officers, foster parents, and coercive counselors. Here was my chance to help others have a better experience than what I had. It was so amazing. I thrived. I worked to improve programs at my placements, built strong relationships with the clientele, and attacked my studies with zeal. I was going to do this and do it right.

I soared through my associate degree and transferred to Portland State University (PSU) for my bachelor’s in Social Work. Throughout, I grappled as much as I could, although Valor BJJ closed and Salem-Keizer BJJ opened in its place. When I got to PSU, I found the Jiu-Jitsu club. At the same time, a friend in my home town was starting up a non-profit MMA club. He and I got together and rented the space and brought in local “at-risk” kids and trained them for free. We helped them build an identity as part of something and tried to show them how to give back to your community. Jiu-Jitsu has become a staple of my life. It’s part of how I see myself, part of my history going back to my first struggles, and part of my recovery. It’s part of my communication of love and caring to others and myself, it’s my place where I can find myself in relation to others, and a place where I can ground my values in the way that I live and interact.

I completed my Bachelor in Social Work and was accepted into the Master’s in Social Work program. My partner, of six-and-a-half years, and I decided to plan our wedding between the first two terms of my master’s degree. Somewhere in there she made some choices that led to the dissolution of our relationship 16 days before our wedding. I was cast adrift. I moved up to Portland to finish my degree and, not knowing what else to do, contacted some of my friends from the PSU Jiu-Jitsu club. They invited me to 5RJJ to train with them. I came, not knowing what I would find but desperate for a place to feel like home. When I came in, I was greeted enthusiastically and treated like family by people who had never met me before. It was exactly what I needed. 5RJJ kept me grounded through those very

difficult months, where I didn't know who I was but did know that if I didn't have a home I'd likely go back to drugs.

I came to 5RJJ and trained. I talked sometimes about what I was going through, but mostly I just trained. Sometimes I arrived in the middle of a class, other times I showed up when the gym was closed. But I kept showing up. I was able to work through my pain in conjunction with others doing Jiu-Jitsu. Whenever I was at the gym, someone was always available to talk or train, always wanted me to be part of things. It didn't matter what I was going through, I was part of a family. In the time since, I have completed my Master's degree, gotten custody of my son, met and married my wife, Mae, and gotten a job expanding addiction treatment services for people with opiate addiction from Scappoose (where we live) to Astoria and Tillamook and everywhere in-between. I've built relationships with community corrections, community mental health, and other treatment providers across three counties, and I've given a national presentation on how to implement our program in other rural areas of the country. I've continued training Jiu-Jitsu as much as possible, although with the distance (40 minutes to the gym) and my numerous obligations this has often been limited to 1 – 2 classes per week, sometimes none. I've always kept in the back of my mind a dream of opening a gym out here in Columbia County, where there is no Jiu-Jitsu, and collaborating with community corrections and addiction treatment services to develop a program of Jiu-Jitsu as a community intervention for these people. In fact, I had registered for the Instructor Training Course here at 5RJJ this past Spring, but unfortunately was unable to participate due to my injury. And now I may never be able to, but I'm not going to focus on that. Instead, I will focus on rebuilding my health and exploring new avenues to connecting physically with myself and others. I'm not willing to discount the possibility of still fulfilling this dream in the future. I may never be able to grapple again, but I may get to a point where I can keep learning and be able to teach.

In closing, all of you have played a role in my life, in ways you may never know. Hopefully, I've done the same for you. The Jiu-Jitsu community is unique in its commitment to and camaraderie with its members. This is a lifestyle that has been there for me during some of my darkest times, and in other

times has provided me a place to find myself again. I hope this isn't goodbye, and I hope this isn't the end of my Jiu-Jitsu career. But if it is, I know that I am a better person for having known the art and those who practice it. I know the formality of bowing on and off the mat is fading, yet it is something that I have continued to hold dear, even though at times I've been the only one in the room doing it. It is a small way that I can demonstrate my gratitude and respect to what Jiu-Jitsu means to me and to keep in mind why I am where I am today. If you read this all, my hat is definitely off to you. If you didn't but you care just the same, my hat is off to you as well. If you can help us financially through this time, we are forever indebted. If you can't help financially but want to do something, please help bring someone else into Jiu-Jitsu. There is something in these walls that is nowhere else, but that should be a cornerstone of our society, and more people need to find it. Thank you again.

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