



NEVER BACKING DOWN

Dennis Medford III Degree

Never Backing Down - I was not afraid.

Growing up was hard having to defend yourself all the time. Wherever I was, school, the park, grabbing food or just out and about, I always had to defend myself. I was never one to walk away, especially if I felt I was in the right, or there was an unjust situation.

My first recall was at my Junior school. One day leaving school, three or four of these boys whom I thought were my friends set on me as I walked out of the school gates. I was trying to defend myself and fight all of them off, one of them hit me in the head with a brick, there was blood everywhere. My mum had to come and look after me as I had suffered a concussion, I vaguely remember my mummy telling me that she had to push me in my little brother's pushchair, that was the last thing I remembered. It did happen again - but this time a woman passed by and brought me to my house to keep me safe.

However, the pattern continued, **I learnt to stand up for myself and my brothers**, so I was always fighting. My daddy was worried about the attacks so as I got older, he decided to **teach us martial arts**, he focused on me as I was the eldest, two or three times a week I would have to practice with my dad, along with my brothers and my sister. At some point I became good, my dad turned to me and said it was my duty to look after my brothers because he had two jobs and couldn't always be there for us. He warned me, *'Don't let me see your brothers come home saying someone hurt them or I will blame and beat you'*. I just smiled, but that was an excuse for me to hit anyone that got funny with me. Looking back, I was never the one to just let anything go, **I was not a bully, but I did not like or tolerate bullies**. If I knew one of my friends or family was being bullied, I would always put myself somewhere around, so I could get involved and protect them, it earned me a reputation. Back then, even the police would say *'do you know the Medford's'*, then let them sort it out for you.

Anytime there was a fight I would be involved - smiling hard, **I always had this inner strength** but my mummy said it was always my bad temper, but, because I had so many brothers that I was protecting it meant I was always fighting. Other kids' mums and dads were at the door all the time asking to see my daddy to complain that I had beaten up their son or sons. A lot of the time it would be more than two or three boys, there was always someone getting bullied, so I just would get in there and fight them.

Growing up I had most of my fights with guys who thought they were better than me or harder than everybody and just wanted to fight me because they had heard about my fights. **I had a reputation**. Anyone who I had beaten up or anyone who was looking for me, my mummy would always hear about it. Ironically, it was my mummy who was the

one to teach me how to fight. She used to tell me scratch and bite them hard and where to bite someone so they would not come back to fight you again. She was right, anybody that I did bite never did come back again. I only stopped biting because of Aids that was about at that time in the 80s.

Some days I would come back in the house with blood all over me; cuts and bruises, sometimes instead of going to hospital I would get some salt and put that on the cuts, it would sting but most of the time **I did not care as I did not mind the pain.**

One day two guys came to the door looking for Wayne, my brother, because he beat up these guys as they were picking on his friends. We realised there were more boys waiting down the road. So, me and my other brother Richard went to see what was going on. Wayne, who they came for was not a fighter, he was placid. Richard and I went to chase them away, as I approached the end of the road, I saw three cars and lots of people getting out and heading towards us and our house looking for Wayne. When they saw me they said , *'you're not Wayne'*, I replied, *'if you want Wayne, you are going to have to go through us first'*. I didn't have to say anything to Richard, he would always know what to do. That day was an almighty fight, one of the guys went to hit me with a bar. Richard stopped him and took him on. I was just punching and kicking anybody that wasn't Richard. We had to fight at least six or seven guys, eventually they jumped back in their cars but before they sped off, the leader of the gang pulled up next to me. Before he could get out of the car, I saw he had a knife. I reacted to grab the knife. I jumped to his car and grabbed his arm and twisted it to his neck, I told him to leave and he did along with the rest of them. Me and Richard were fine, we had no injuries.

A few days later when Richard and I were in the park with some girlfriends, someone shouted, *'you're gonna get it'*. I saw a big guy swinging two sticks, he acted like Bruce Lee. I told Richard to take the girls home and I would deal with him. Funnily I did, I did not feel frightened at all, **it became so normal to have people coming at me for fights**, but this time I thought, *'I'm going to get smacked up today'*. This guy was swinging the sticks very fast, and he was good, he looked like a pro, like a martial arts expert. As he got closer, I tried to think what to do. A passerby was cycling past, I knocked him off his bike, picked it up and hit the guy over the head. He was on the ground, so I picked up the sticks and hit him hard with them, then I couldn't stop, and I just kept hitting him until he did not move. I remembered people shouting at me to stop, including some boys who were playing football, but I was seeing red, and I couldn't, I was so full of rage. Eventually I did stop. Later I found out the guy had spent weeks in hospital and had a lot of broken bones, **but it was either him or me**. Incidents like this went on for years.

The police knew us well, they came to the house all the time, **but I never went to look for trouble**. I have lost count the number of times I came home full of blood. The police never blamed the white guys, they always hounded us, the black guys. **Racism was a normal part of my life**.

One day I went to pick up a take-away for my mum and brothers, my mum had seen police at the end of the road and told me to be careful, as she thought there had been an accident. I walked down the road and thought most of the police had gone, I kept walking across the road to the take-away then I recognised the person in their car from the previous knife attack. I ran over to them and asked if they were okay and don't forget to take their names and what had happened. Before I could finish, lots of police in black came from no-where, running at me saying '*go away, leave the area*'. I just said I was going to help but they told me to go away. The police came at me and said '*move, move, move*'. I never had a minute to even step back they grabbed my arm and twisted it around, I fell to the ground, hitting my face, then everything went mad. **Police came from everywhere; it was as if they were waiting for me**. The police kicked, punched, and dragged me across the ground. There were so many police officers on top of me I couldn't breathe and was grasping for air. I thought I was going to die. Although the police were on top of me, I could see a little hole and I saw my friend running towards us. I really thought it was going to be my last breath but Kevin, my friend, rugby tackled them, and it gave me some air. Kevin has sadly passed away, **but I believe he saved my life**. The police re-grouped and put me in hand cuffs and other police put straps on my legs and hit me and dragged me by my hair whilst punching me in my face with black leather gloves on, they were saying, '*we will teach you to mess with the police you n****r*'. They kept hitting me in the face and the body, they hit any part of my body they could.

That day helped me, it made me think about what I was going to do to help defend myself and learn to fight as many people as I could take on. That same year I had a lot of fights, too many to remember. It was like that everywhere all the time, **guys just wanted to fight me**, looking back it was a street cred thing, I think it was to prove themselves even though I had not done anything to them.

One day I was walking through town with my brothers, I saw a friend walking down the road clearly upset. I asked what was going on and he told me some guys had taken his coat. So, I went over to them and asked for it back, they said '*it is nothing to do with you*'. They were swearing at me and telling me to back off. I was reasonable and repeatedly asked for my friend's coat back, I wasn't going to leave until my friend was given his coat back. Then the leader came at me, so I punched him, he went down but got back up to kick me, I caught the kick and put him down on the ground and was punching him.

Some people pulled me off. We got the coat back and walked off, not thinking much about what had happened.

About 15 minutes later, people were saying to me '*watch your back*', the same guy I was fighting was coming at me with a kitchen knife. A friend gave me a little stick. I thought it was a flick knife, it was a little black knife that was no bigger than my little fingernail. I didn't know what I was going to do with it. Both guys that was trying to cut me and was slashing their knives at me, I was jumping away and moving around, but they kept coming at me with two big knives. I punched one and kicked the other, but one got too close to me, I grabbed his arm and caught him with the small knife, I didn't think it would do anything, but it did, and I should not have used it, in that moment I felt bad, but they still were coming at me. I dodged them, but then another gang arrived and came at me with tennis rackets, hitting me over my head. **Blows were coming from everywhere.** I fell back into a shop, one of the guys kept hitting and got close to me so I grabbed his leg and bit him as hard as I could, I did not stop, I kept biting him. They stopped hitting me, two of the guys ran off, the only one left was their brother. When the hitting stopped, he ran off too. I was bleeding from all over my head and my face. I got up and walked to the bus stop with my two little brothers. Two police officers were trying to take me and ask me how I was, I said I was okay and then fell over. The police had known what had happened as people had told them, they just followed me, telling me to go home. **The top I had on was white, but now it was red because of all the blood.**

About two weeks later, I was out with friends having a drink in a place called 'After Dark'. It had been a great night; the music was good and I was with joking with friends. Suddenly a man walked up to our table and said, '*are you the fguy that beat up my sons?*'. I did not know what to say anymore. More people started to walk over to my table and started to crowd me and my friends. There was a husband and wife at my table, they were not fighters. I felt a bit worried for them. I just kept thinking, '*what am I gonna do now?*', then I heard a voice say '*if three of your sons couldn't take my son what chance do you think you have with him?*', and laughed at the person standing over me. I knew it was my daddy - he finished by saying, '*anybody who troubles my son, troubles me*'. I knew it was time to go, me and my daddy have not spoken about that night to this day, **but I am glad he diffused the situation.**

The situations didn't stop. One evening I was out with a few friends, we were just waiting in a queue to get some food, when a group of skin heads mimicking the Nazi sign started on us. We easily fought them off and it was sort of funny, but it was the **first time I really remembered being attacked blatantly because of the colour of my skin**, it was an experience that I could do without and didn't want to experience again.

Another evening as I was walking home, I saw my daddy working on his car outside, then six or seven guys came and rounded on him, but my daddy was cool and calm even when they were shouting at him, he didn't flinch, but I was getting mad. My mum came to see what was going on and pushed me into the house, but I was so angry, I ran into the front room so I could climb out of the window. Once outside, I stood next to my dad, he said, '*you okay*'? **I nodded, the guys were talking loudly, and we could hear their insults - my dad could hear but he wasn't listening**, he just kept working on his car engine. But I had enough and said, '*stop shouting at my Dad*'. But they kept on, I said, '*stop being so disrespectful*'. Just as one of the guys started to shout again, I punched him in the nose, and then I punched him again. My dad said to them, '*do you want to keep on shouting*'? They didn't say a word.

With all these incidents and experiences, **I wanted it to stop**. I knew it wouldn't, but I wanted to learn something about how to protect myself and stop me from going over the top – **how to control my temper** and not just keep hitting and hitting. One day my cousin visited he was an excellent boxer, so he had a chat with me about what I wanted to do. I explained I wanted to learn how to fight. I did not want to go boxing because my daddy had taken me for lessons, the trainer was sparring with me, he started to shower punches on me, he hit me in the nose and the face, I couldn't get out of the way fast enough and I was in pain, but rather than give in I felt the rage burn up so I started to hit him back and then I lost control and started to kick him in the ring, everybody was shouting and then I felt myself being lifted up. My dad had come in from outside and lifted me out of the ring and took me home. I thought he was going to be mad, but he said nothing to me and has never spoken about it to me to this day. I knew I didn't want to go boxing. My cousin Robert introduced me to Taekwon-do, I went regularly and became good at it, he had found **a school which taught Taekwon-do** and I became a member, **it was okay because it reminded me of street fighting**, and **I liked it**. We trained regularly, and even when my cousin Robert stopped, I continued. I enjoyed it and enjoyed being with the people I met. **Taekwon-do was good for me and I went training two or three times a week, it was nice and respectable**.

One day, my instructor was away so we had to train somewhere else. It was like stepping back into the old situations. There was a lot of hate, and I could feel the hate, no one welcomed me when I walked in, and no one spoke to me.

When I had finished warming up, we were going to do some sparring. Most of the other members were black belts, at the time I was a yellow belt. I was partnered with a red belt, a guy who was about the same height and weight as me, we sparred and he came in with some hard blows, I thought, '*I'm not having that*', so I kicked him in the head and anywhere I could, he slowed down his attack on me, and we were moved around. This

time I was with a black belt but I handled myself, then the instructor put me with his best student and I thought, here we go. I was not going to let this guy beat me, I was moving around pretty good, and the guy was moving around pretty good too. We were going back and forth, and **I did a few moves my daddy had shown me and was getting the upper hand.** He was annoyed, I was beating him and they thought I was making their school look bad. The instructor stepped in and stopped it. He then asked us all to gather in the centre of the room and was showing us how to deal with someone attacking you. He asked for a volunteer, and then picked me. He told me to '*come at him*'. He was waiting for me to come at him. I did just that and braced myself because I thought it might be a hard kick, but it was worse than. He kicked me so hard with a side kick, I thought he had broken my ribs in two or three places, he hit me with all of his force and then turned and said to his students, '*that's how you do it*'. He told me to sit down and ignored me whilst telling his other students, that is what you do when someone attacks you, he never gave me a chance to say I wouldn't have done that if he hadn't of told me to. He continued to say, '*that is how you deal with some-one like that*'. Clearly, he was showing off. **I was in agony and the pain lasted for weeks.** This did not stop me from going back, I was so used to being hurt, I just took it and walked back in because I was not scared of him or his students. My Taekwon-do instructor came back a few months later and I went back to training with him but I never forgot what happened. **This made me stronger, not only was I faster and stronger than anybody that fought me I could now control myself and my power.** The area and some of the students were racist but this did not bother me because I could handle myself. This incident taught me to never be like that instructor who purposely hurt me, **I would never disrespect any student.**

Eventually my instructor left so I had to look for somewhere closer but not in my town as I did not want anyone to know what I was doing; my family knew but I didn't want anyone in the town knowing because I always had guys looking for me to have a fight with and I thought if they knew I was learning a martial art it would provoke them.

Even though I loved fighting I just didn't want to do it on the streets or when someone came at me. **I can honestly say I never started a fight,** but I did finish them. The police came like they always did they would come and arrest me or one of my brothers. The police at this time of my life, let people sort out their own problems and encouraged it, but when I did, they came to arrest me, I was an easy target. **To get ahead I knew I had to sort out my temper and I did.** I did not go over the top with anyone or the police, I learnt how to constrain myself.

Much of this story examples incidents when I had lost self-control. I have grown and continue to learn - **Taekwon-do helped me to control my emotions, my temper and my anger.** To this day I know it helps me still and I still relish the thought of learning more of this art. **It has taught me courtesy, integrity, perseverance, self-control and indomitable spirit.** I have been at my current Taekwon-do school since a blue belt and I train weekly, I help with the younger students and enjoy passing on my knowledge to the students who love to fight, I am older and wiser now to see how losing your temper loses you the fight.

The end.

