

MMA fighter overcame tough childhood to help youth

Editor's Note: Ian Butler of the Silverback Wrestling Club in California shared his life story with Bill X. Barron.

I truly live for kids like me who grow up without anything. Life ain't easy, nor is wrestling. Both are a grind. Wrestling has taught me that I can fight off whatever challenge life throws at me. Like someone once said: "If you do something hard, life is way easier."

My choices made life a lot harder than it needed to be. No one was there to show me the path or to mentor me. What I do today is completely different, not only because my mistakes were my teachers, but also because I was wise enough to surround myself with support people who held me to my best.

Born in St. Louis, Mo., our family moved to southern California in search of a better life. To get me off the streets, my single mom got me involved with baseball and football through the Boys and Girls Club. But we were homeless and gear was expensive. All I needed for wrestling was the pair of shoes I borrowed from the club bucket. At age 5, I became a wrestler.

Soon afterward, I was taken away from my mother who was suffering from drug abuse. I never had a dad. So, my mom's



Ian Butler (left) celebrated a second-place team finish with members of his Silverback Club at the D-Day tourney in San Diego near the Midway aircraft carrier.

best friend adopted me and I moved to San Diego. Family does not need to be blood. Even though my adopted mom died while I was in college, her kids and relatives continue to be a big part of my life.



Back in St. Louis, my birth mom got her life together enough to take me back. But Ritenour High School was drug-ridden. I hung out with the wrong crowd and made bad choices. One of those led me to overdose. In the hospital, I literally died when my heart stopped.

Adoption means that even now, while I have defined my own identity, I still hunger for success. After I was kicked out of Ritenour, I was home-schooled and earned a GED. At the same time, I started training Brazilian jiu-jitsu and kickboxing at Absolute Martial Arts.

In my first amateur fight, I TKO'd an undefeated opponent in the second round. Eventually, I was not only placing but also winning big titles across the country, becoming the top amateur in the country. Deciding not to pursue college right away, I trained in St. Louis with Cornell Robinson, the USA Junior Cadet coach, who had a significant impact on my life. He brought me back into the wrestling room, where my love of wrestling returned. There I helped coach John Saunders and Malik Johnson, both four-time Missouri state champions as well as other state titlists like two-timer DJ Shannon.

When I signed a pro contract with Bellator, Cornell was in my corner. I had a triumphant return to San Diego, where I gave the Boys Club free tickets to the fight. Like I told them, I have worn the same hand-me-down clothes.

Some people don't give these kids credit; they simply assume they are on the wrong path. Rather, I see them as ones who walk in my same shoes. They just need someone to believe in them.

I am not ashamed of where I come. It is an incentive to prove to people that even kids who start life with nothing can make something out of their lives, even become a professional athlete.

My background reminds me that I have a calling to shape young people's lives. In the wrestling room, everything else is blocked out. It's just you and your workout partner. The room is where you overcome adversity. Here you learn to keep your focus despite wins or losses.

It all comes down to staying consistent as a person. When I was with Bellator and my fights were on ESPN, old friends reached out to me. They were still doing drugs, but through me, they knew they could do better.

I've learned that if you surround yourself with great people, they make you great as well. My friends just need to make smarter choices about whom they hang out with. When I returned to Costa Mesa in SoCal, I took this same life-altering philosophy with me.

From the outset, I emphasized with the kids that they had to be great, both on the wrestling mat and in their lives. Great does not mean that you will win every time; it means your greatness is defined by the best

By Ian Butler

that you can give in each and every situation.

No matter the result, our kids wrestle all the way through the final seconds. Though their style will always be aggressive, off the mat we expect them to be extremely respectful as well as grateful for the opportunity. Each day on the mat is one to show your gratitude for the chance to become great.

As their coach, I have learned to balance my own competitive nature with an emphasis on sportsmanship. Regardless of the outcome, I make it a point to always be respectful and calm. My first priority is for my kids to know that I am there for them.

I praise my kids for having the courage to step out on the mat. While coaching them, my intensity comes out but in ways that will make them better. I point out errors, not to embarrass them but show them what they can do to make it right the next time.

I am afraid of death of flying on a plane, but to succeed on the mat is like staying calm amid the turbulence. I am just the co-pilot; the wrestling is up to them. When on a plane, I keep my equilibrium by watching the flight attendant remain poised regardless of what the plane does.

Likewise, I want to be the one that helps my kids retain their balance between the intensity of the moment and the need to stay calm. Whether ahead or behind, I want them to stay in the match, just as how I learned to thrive, not just survive, in the game of life.

The Silverback Wrestling Club brings 40-50 kids to every RMN event we can attend. Through Xtreme Pro, I now have a signature contract to make my own line of apparel and singlets. Josh and Adam Gutierrez treat us like family. Josh is just an amazing human being.

RMN's superior production makes the kids feel special just to be part of their events. When the lights go down and the lasers come out, it gives them chills. Our kids love the mix of individual competition with the duals. They were really psyched to take home a huge second-place trophy for our team performance in freestyle at the D-Day in San Diego this past September.

Most importantly, RMN has a whole-on approach to wrestling, including patriotism and observance of faith. Faith is central to my life. I OD'd. I'm not supposed to be here on this earth. On the path of life, I did not choose a coach; He chose me. Into this life came gratitude. And peace.

No matter the result, you will remember this moment on the mat for the rest of your life. Honor it with your gratitude and your sacrifice. "If you do something hard, life is way easier." ■