



Episode 372 – Mr. Mark Miller | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com



Jeremy Lesniak:

Hi, there. This is whistlekick Martial Arts Radio, and in fact, it is the 372nd episode. That's right. This is episode 372, and today, I'm joined by Mr. Mark Miller. Here at whistlekick, my name is Jeremy. Sometimes, I'm called Whistle Pres. - one of the weirder nicknames I have but, you know what, it works, doesn't it? Because this is whistlekick. I'm the president of the company. I founded it because I love the martial arts and I'm doing everything I can to support the martial arts, to give back; and this show is one of those things that we do. You can find all of the episodes at whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. And if you want to do something for us, you can head on over to whistlekick.com. Use the code `PODCAST15`, save 15% on the uniforms, on the sparring gear, on the sweatshirts, the sweatpants, sneakers - so much cool stuff over there. It's about three-quarters of my wardrobe at this point.

Now, today's guest. We've got some mutual friends, and that usually builds well. If I know people in common with someone, we usually have a good conversation. But today, we had a great conversation. It's always a good time when I get someone on the other end of the line who spent some time podcasting, and Mr. Miller is one of those people. Now, he's not podcasting about martial arts but it's still led to some excellent conversation, a conversation I'm sure you're going to enjoy. So, here it is. Mr. Miller, welcome to whistlekick Martial Arts Radio.



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Mark Miller:

Well, thank you. I really appreciate you having me on the show. A martial arts friend of mine, Craig Wharem is a huge fan and he said great things about you guys. So, I'm honored to be here.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Well, I'm honored as well. Craig has been a great guy, an immense supporter of everything that we've been doing. I really value his friendship. I'm pretty sure he's listening, and I'm pretty sure he listens regardless of whether or not he knows people on the show, so.

Mark Miller:

I can guarantee you he is.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Sure, he is. He better be, anyway.

Mark Miller:

You know what, why don't we just dedicate this show to Craig Wharem.

Jeremy Lesniak:

There we go.

Mark Miller:

For all he [02:03](#) for the martial arts.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yes, someone who definitely does not get the recognition that he deserves.

Mark Miller:

That's right.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

Honestly, there's so many.

Mark Miller:

That's true.

Jeremy Lesniak:

The recognition that we seem to toss around in martial arts is limited to a very few. And while those few - I'm intentionally not gonna name names - the folks that we think of when we think of honoring people in the martial arts, it's so easy to forget that without some of the "lesser important" folks whose role was to teach and pass onto that person who did the same to that person, who did the same for that person led to this person that we now know of from whatever it means. And without those middle dominoes, nothing would have happened.

Mark Miller:

Yeah. You know, Jeremy, I think you bring up a fantastic point, and we definitely have our heroes in the martial arts, the names that we would all know. But, you know, I've been around for a long time and the real heroes to me are the people that were my instructors that not everybody would know. But people that whose lives they've touched certainly know them. And there's just a lot of great people and a lot of heroes and a lot of sort of silent heroes, I guess we'll call them, throughout the martial arts. That's a real good point.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah. Yeah, that term hero is kinda funny because it's one that we all use.

Mark Miller:

Uh-hum.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And to be honest, most of us use it wrong.

Mark Miller:



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And I may just have.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And I don't mean that in... To me, a hero, and I think most people, a hero is someone who goes above and beyond at their own sacrifice, right?

Mark Miller:

Yeah. I used it right.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah. And I think quite often, and I am not going to name any of these people or professions or industries, because that's when it starts to get polarizing, right? That's when the subjectivity comes into play.

Mark Miller:

Right.

Jeremy Lesniak:

But when we talk about martial arts instructors.... There's this wonderful graphic that I saw going around social media, and it was two people bowing and it was, clearly, one was a student, one was the instructor. And the student had a small puzzle piece missing from them. And the instructor was giving them that piece but you saw that they had quite a few pieces missing from them.

Mark Miller:

Right.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And the takeaway was that martial arts instructors tend to give [04:36](#) themselves to their students, often times to their own detriment.

Mark Miller:



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Yeah, I got you. It's...

Jeremy Lesniak:

And it happens.

Mark Miller:

book, The Giving Tree analogy.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah. Yeah, very much like that. Wonderful book.

Mark Miller:

It's a wonderful book and it's a great analogy. And, I think, as a martial artist, that run a little differently to me than other people, and I'm sure most of the people listening know The Giving Tree. It's a tree that befriend somebody and keeps giving bits of it starting with its fruits and ending with it, you know, the trunk of the tree for the person to build a house, until there's nothing but a [05:08](#) there. And the guy ends up as an old man having a place to sit because the [05:12](#) is still there.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah.

Mark Miller:

And, boy, if that's not a lifetime martial arts instructor analogy that just works, I don't know what is. You know?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah. Quite appropriate, I think.

Mark Miller:

Yeah.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

And so, when we think about heroes in the martial arts... If the hero is someone who goes above and beyond to their own personal sacrifice... I mean, how many school owners out there are teaching simply because they love it? Even when they don't love it that day or that week or that year...

Mark Miller:

Yeah

Jeremy Lesniak:

Or that sacrifice to their friends, their family and sometimes their professional career, development, finances, etcetera.

Mark Miller:

Yup.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And not to say that people who have a strong successful school and make good money and have a good life balance aren't heroes. But if we take the 800 ft. view, there are a lot of martial arts heroes.

Mark Miller:

It's true, and I think that... You know, I think you're really hitting [06:13](#) head. I think that if you, you know, their students, the parents of those students - those are the people that are looking at that instructor and really appreciating they've given to them. And I can tell you why that instructor does it, and it's why I do it. And it's because somebody did it for me. So, if we go back to the piece analogy, I feel almost like I have a bucket full of pieces that I need to give away at this point, because somebody filled that bucket up for me. So, it's time for me to give back. And I think that that's really what, you know, that lineage of the martial arts and those instructors and people that we call heroes. I really think that's what's going on, that somebody gave them something that they appreciate and they're just paying it back by providing to their students.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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That's such an elegant way of extending that analogy. That you're passing on pieces because they were given to you. I really like that. Now, this might be a good time for us to take a step back. Because, you know, we launched into conversation. I absolutely love when that happens. You know, talking about pieces being passed on. But we haven't even talked about you or your martial background or anything like that. So, let me kinda rollback the tape and we can ask the "boring" question of how did you get started?

Mark Miller:

Yeah. Well, you know, I don't have a very... You know, a lot of people, I think, when they talk about their pathway to the martial arts, there's some profound reason why they entered the martial arts. My story's not that. I... So, this is rollback to like 1983, alright. And I used to... I was about somewhere around 13 to 15 years old, then I used to spend my Friday nights at Happy Wheels skating around in circles to songs. I was a younger kid there. And, you know, this was a time when there was some young ladies at Happy Wheels that I thought might be kinda pretty and that I was interested in. And at the same time, I would lay on the foot of my parents bed and watch, I think, like, one of the channel 56 channels of the time would just play Bruce Lee movies on a loop, and just cycle through all of them. So, I'm watching Bruce Lee flip around these nunchucks. And in my adolescent brain, I came up with this brilliant theory that if I could use nunchucks like Bruce Lee, specifically nunchucks, that maybe some of these girls at Happy Wheels that I thought looked pretty good might start paying attention because they weren't. So, this led me to asking my mom, hey, can I learn nunchucks? And my good friend, Bill Seisler, was studying martial arts at a local dojo, it was a Bob Meserve's Health and Self Defence right in Exeter, New Hampshire. It's Bob Meserve. Master Meserve had a few of these throughout, like, Northern Massachusetts, Southern New Hampshire and that area. So, we went down to our local dojo and talked to the instructor, kind of on the recommendation of my buddy and his parents. And I stood there and said, I wanna learn nunchucks. And I got this kind of look from the instructor. He took a pause and he said, well, we can't just teach you nunchucks. You've got to study the martial arts, and as part of your martial arts training, you... You know, you might have an opportunity one day to learn nunchucks. So, this fantasy in my head of swinging around nunchucks and being really good at it, maybe saving - we talked about being a hero earlier - maybe saving one of these young ladies and gaining her interest started to crumble a little bit. And I thought, well, this sounds like a lot of hard work. And the story that everybody loves me to tell at this point is that, I also used to come home in my adolescent way, and one of my favorite things to do after school, was to watch Charlie's Angles because of the incredible, intricate [10:20](#) and acting that went on in the show that I was interested in at this age. And I actually had a moment where I had to decide whether or not I was gonna take this leap and study this, you know, weird Karate thing so I could eventually get to these nunchucks, or if I



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really wanted to continue making sure I had watched every single episode of this Charlie's Angles reruns. And for some reason, I made the right decision, and I decided that I was gonna sign up and start taking lessons at my local dojo. So, not profound, just silly teenager trying to work out a way to be more appealing to the young ladies.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And possible the most honest origin story we've ever had in 300 and whatever episodes. I love it.

Mark Miller:

I'll try to be honest, but that's it. And it's true - I really did... You know, I had these fantasies worked up where we would be leaving Happy Wheels and there would be the bad guy. You know, like The Karate Kid, right?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah.

Mark Miller:

Like Johnny would come up and be giving one of these girls a hard time, and I'd somehow have a pair of nunchucks. You can fill in the rest.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So, I gotta ask. Did it ever work?

Mark Miller:

No.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Oh.

Mark Miller:



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No, no. Well, actually, yes.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Okay.

Mark Miller:

By the time I became an instructor, a couple of my girlfriends, and of course, I was very young when I was having these initial thoughts. So, you know, later in my high school career and stuff like that, I did meet a couple of great girls that I had been in relationship with through the martial arts. And certainly, it probably [12:01](#) plays a much larger role with me as a father and my family and stuff like that. That's really where it ended up paying off.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Now, of course, any of us in hindsight, anybody who's ever been a teenager - which is probably the majority of people listening to this show - knows that the personal development side of martial arts can have a pretty profound impact. And, you know, at that time of your life, I can imagine that a lot of the things that you were facing and feeling were likely helped, dealt with, lessened at least, from your training. Is that fair to say?

Mark Miller:

So, this is where it does become profound and [12:45](#) question because, you know... The martial arts was delivered to me in this kinda silly way, but it was something that I needed at that time. So, I was struggling in a couple of different ways. One of them was I was struggling athletically. I really had a hard time connecting with team sports, and I wanted to connect with team sports. But sometimes, I kinda would do okay, and more often than not, I wouldn't do very well. I had tried hockey and my own teammate sort of made fun of my inability to skate. At the time I started Karate. I was actually on a baseball team, and I was such a poor baseball player that my own team would make fun of me. You've got to be bad not to have your own team on your side. But I, you know, I kinda stuck with it and tried to do these things. And at the same time as I was kinda having that struggle, the bigger struggle for me really came academically. Because I had ADHD - have ADHD - and at that time, I didn't know this, right? It's not... Again, rollback to the early '80s, we didn't... It was wasn't quite the same thing. I was on a 5 or 4 plans through school. I'm being diagnosed with this ADHD. My parents at that time had chosen, and I really agree with the choice especially given the knowledge that they had at that time, but they had chosen not to put me on any kind of medication, and really to try and give me the help I needed



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through process and those kinds of things. It was difficult, and I didn't know this. I didn't have this label on myself at all. All I knew is that my friends were getting good grades on the test. And when I'd ask them how they knew the information, they would say, well, because teacher said it. And I would have no recollection of the teacher having said those things. You know, just this is one real specific example of how it has affected me. I would be pulled off into different classrooms to get different levels of help while my friends stayed in the normal classroom and things like this. So, when I started in the martial arts, it gave me my first successes. I was much better at an individual sport and at working on personal growth and at the one-on-one type help that an instructor can give you - even in a group class, right? Like I was finding those group classes but somebody's always kinda, like, looking out for you. And I learned that if I'm using my body, I can focus. So, even to this day, I still workout a lot. I still do a lot of different things in the martial arts and just workout in general. I don't put headphones on; I'm not that guy. And the reason is, is because that is my time to focus. I don't need the distraction. If I'm working, I'm listening to music, I'm listening to podcast like this one. I need the distraction to keep me focused as weird as it sounds. But when I was moving my body, doing the martial arts, I was focused, and that became a template that I could start to work with and apply to other things. And I actually developed structures to the martial arts that made me more successful academically. I wouldn't say that it was... Hang on a second. You can edit that out but I..

Jeremy Lesniak:

Sure.

Mark Miller:

My cellphone. I apologize for that. I wouldn't say that it was a perfect solution but it certainly... And I think this is really what a lot of the eastern philosophy shows us and learning some of these - the eastern philosophies - I was actually conscious of applying these. But the martial arts became kind of an analogy for how to focus and to structure and how to learn that allowed me to be more successful in this academic setting. And I actually started as I went into high school - not again to have 100% success but to build some successes because of what I was learning through the martial arts. And then, of course, all of the way I felt about myself - being a baseball player whose own team made fun of them, being an unsuccessful basketball player, being a hockey player whose team made fun of them - I started to become somebody that other students looked up to in the dojo and myself. But the perception of myself - my self-worth - completely changed. I was admired by my instructors for my successes. And as you know Karate instructors, they're just very good at building up their students and pointing out how they're doing well. And it really started to reforge who I was and how I thought about



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myself in a ways that was incredibly positive. And if my mom was here today, on this podcast with us, she would say - because she said it before = that martial arts saved at a time when I was struggling. So, as odd as that origin story is, that's what it quickly became to me.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Wow. There's a lot there. We could take a lot of different directions.

Mark Miller:

Sure thing.

Jeremy Lesniak:

From everything that you just said. And I think it's pretty natural that at that age, we want to be accepted. I think that's, you know... I've read some interesting psychology, sociology stuff around that, especially around that age. Our desire to be accepted is pretty strongly tied to how we define ourselves, our own self-worth.

Mark Miller:

Absolutely.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So, I'm curious. You know, not finding that success in baseball, your own team making fun of you, how did your time in martial arts - hopefully early on, even - changed that?

Mark Miller:

Well, you know...

Jeremy Lesniak:

Well,, admittedly, that wasn't the best way to ask the question but I think you know where I'm going?

Mark Miller:



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Yeah, I do.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Okay.

Mark Miller:

I'm with you. And I know I'm throwing a lot out so it's... I know you're formulating thoughts as we're - just like I am - as we're going here.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I'm trying.

Mark Miller:

So, it's all fair game. But I really do kinda feel where you're coming from there. And, you know, I think the first way that it changed me is that it gave me some confidence. I think that when you're not confident as a young person, sometimes you don't realize that you're not confident. And what I mean by that is you hit on earth so little time, but it's just sort of who you are. And I don't want to give the impression that I didn't have confidence. I had a pretty good ability to isolate different things in my life. So, I wasn't like this really reserved, like, held back kid that was in a sad state or anything like that. I just had these specific struggles and probably wasn't as confident as I could be. So, confidence really was just a direct delivery of having success from the martial arts. And with that, it really showed me that I didn't have to accept things, like, not being good at baseball or not being good at academics, right? And this is something I would... This builds, right? So, I would say, today, I still learn it in various ways. But it showed me that if I could figure out how, and I had the right level of discipline, that there was always a pathway to success, and that being successful at something was more of a decision than it was granted. So, being bad at baseball, I identified as a bad baseball player. Once I became successful in the martial arts, I made a choice to not play baseball and to become successful at something else - and that was the martial arts at that time and some academic pursuits, maybe a few other things. But I think that that's really how that changed for me. And having that perspective on the change, being sort of self-aware and seeing that change, it was, from a psychological standpoint, it was an easy way to wash away any of the negative that was created through some of those events, like your own team making fun of you. I realized they were silly kids. I didn't quite know how to be successful at that at that time, and that's all it is. There's no lasting



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effect for me. And, again, I think it's because of learning that through the martial arts and gaining those perspectives. Does that answer your question?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah, it does. It does, but it leads to more, of course, as they all do. As a parent, as an instructor, how do you counsel people when they're going through a situation like that, especially someone at that age?

Mark Miller:

Yeah, you know, that's a really good question and it's probably a really complicated answer because... Like with many things like that, it really depends on the child and what they're going through. You know, I really have, I think, an advantage because of the struggles that I went through - that particular struggle - the struggle I've had with learning certain things. When I learn something, I really know how I learned it. So, I think, that I can turn around and apply that to teaching and make myself a better teacher. So, I think that one thing it's taught me to do is really listen to the student, first and foremost, and really try to unpack specifically what they're going through. Because it may not be exactly what I went through or exactly I've counseled another student in that they went through. But you're really need to [22:54](#) with that individual student is going through. And then, once you understand that, I think you can bring some of these other pieces that you've learned throughout your life and your career, and that you've learned... I mean, we're always learning from our students, right? So, I learn a lot despite working with the students. But, you know, I think generally speaking, it's this idea that you can't do things. The idea is what do you want? Let's forget about the difficulty that you're having getting there, and let's talk about what you want. And when we define what that is, then let's figure out what your path is to get there. And I'll give you an example. I'm not gonna name the student because I don't know that they would want me to or not, but there's a student that I have right now, and if this person's listening, he'll know who I'm talking about. And I have a ton of admiration for this student, and I relate to this student quite a bit because like me, they struggle with some attention issues. And it can really come across as some negatives in class, I'm sure academically and all that for them as well, but I can get very frustrated with him in class. They can get frustrated with themselves in class. Other students can get frustrated with him in class just because of this sort of, you know, lack of control and bursting out and inability to kind of stay on task. And one of the things that I talked to them about is, I say, look, I have trouble staying on task. So, when you're distracting me by not staying on task, it makes it twice as hard for me to teach class. Because now, you're kinda pulling me with you, which is an interesting way, I think, to relate to that student. But the story I want to get to here is that the



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student and I sat down. This is not long ago. This is a recent story. And I just said, look, I'm exhausted here. I'm tired of this. Like, you were so good at what you do, you have such positive moments in what you do with us, you're becoming a leader in this dojo. Other students are looking up from you, and you're really successful. But why do you think, I'm talking to the student, why do you think we keep having to circle back around to this where we're sitting in the office and we're talking about your behavior and the way you negatively impacted some students again and again and again? It doesn't seem like we should have to, and it seems like something we can solve. And to this student's credit, his reaction to that kind of conversation is, I agree and I want to solve it. But, like the situation the I talked about, it doesn't mean that he knows how to do that; it doesn't mean that I know how to do that. It's a journey that the student and I have together. So, we talked for a while. We're searching at this point. I don't have any great answers here, and neither does he. But we're talking, we're searching. And this conversation quickly changes from kind of a disciplinary conversation to a very adult conversation, again, to this kid's credit. And this is why I admire him so much. He could be angry and upset that somebody's calling him to the carpet again, but he takes a mature approach trying to figure this out. And through this discourse, we learned that one of the reasons why he's sort of [26:14](#) in class a lot is because he has an appreciation for comedy and for comedians, and he's trying to be funny. And this is another area that we kind of connect on because I love comedy, too. Like, who doesn't? I can sit... You know, I run kind of like a light class, I try to be funny in class a little bit to keep the students on their toes and entertained. I like cracking a joke or trying to make somebody laugh in normal discourse too. But what it leads to is this discussion of timing, right? And this discussion of gravity. Gravity is the sole of wit, I think. I may have messed it up a little bit but that's a Shakespearean quote, I think. That sort of editing down makes things funnier, and timing makes things effective. So, you can teach somebody the best jab in the world or the best cross or the best roundhouse kick in the world, and they can be the best at it. But if they don't have proper timing, they'll never land it and it'll never be effective with them. So, through unpacking all this and landing on this comedy theme with him, we discussed that maybe, class was the time for him to work on timing. Because I told him, I said, if you say something and it brings down the class and everybody enjoys it, that's great. It's the every minute [27:37](#) saying something and only having ten of them land and the other nine being distractions for everyone, [27:43](#) a problem. And if you really learn what's appropriate in class and if you edit it down, really ask yourself before you deliver that thing that you think is funny, is this really worth it? Or do I want to hold that for something better? And that gave him a framework that he understood, that he appreciated, that reaches him toward some of his other goals to work on these issues that we're having in class. And I think that that really illustrates my approach for working with these students and really figuring out what's gonna work for them.



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Jeremy Lesniak:

Wow. I have to confess that I'm just... I'm struck at, again, how open and honest you're being, and how that has translated into the way that you will run a class. I think we can all... Anyone's who's ever taught a class knows the challenge of teaching someone who is kinda the comedian, you know, looking for that attention and how distracting it can be. But at the same time, a well-timed comment that allows the class to stay up and entertained and engaged can be not only okay but actually beneficial to people's attention span.

Mark Miller:

Absolutely, yeah. And that's... There's some value in that sort of strict Japanese regimented class but I really appreciate an open class, and I really appreciate the personality of students being allowed to thrive in that class.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah. And I came up in that primarily strict environment. Most of the schools that I've trained in have had that. But the interesting thing I found is that most people do not seem to do their best in that environment. And so, here you have this student who you actually find a way to get everybody on the same side of the table. They get to work on what they're working on, you're working on what you're working on, you're having honest conversation about it. And I would guess that on the other side of this, everyone including the unnamed students, is happier and better off for it.

Mark Miller:

Yeah, absolutely. I'm happier, they're happier. Even if it doesn't quite work, we can feel good that we really together work on a solution that at least got us somewhere. It may require reevaluation, it may require adjustment. And, you know, by the way, I don't want to give the impression that this is how it goes all the time.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Right.

Mark Miller:



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This is a success. This was a good one. I fall flat on my face probably more often than that kind of thing happens, but that's the ideal goal. And it takes two to tango, right? Like, I really, and if you're listen [30:50](#) who I'm talking about, I really have to give this student a ton of credit for being willing to play ball in this situation, and not taking kind of a negative I-don't-need-to-listen-to-you or something like that approach. It really does. I've been in that opposite situation where the student just... They're embarrassed, they're offended, and they just either [31:12](#) their way through it or rebel a little bit. And this guy's not that person at all.

Jeremy Lesniak:

But despite it not working 100% of the time, you still trusted the student. You still gave them the space to grow as not just a person doing punches and kicks, but as an overall human being.

Mark Miller:

Oh, absolutely.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And I don't know that most instructors are going to have the confidence to do that. Now, I've been the comedian in the class. And honestly, I still am. And once in a while, my timing isn't right. Sure. And it does come across inappropriate, I freely admit that.

Mark Miller:

Yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

But the way most instructors handle that, the way I did in the limited time that I had my own school, was to just squash it. Because if the timing is never there to even question, it can't be a problem.

Mark Miller:

Yeah. Well, and that's appropriate too at times. Like, again I don't want to give the impression that sometimes I don't just give a finger out or give a stare or call somebody over and say, that's enough of that. You know, [32:25](#) if it happens again. I mean, you've got to run a class. You've got to run a class that's beneficial to everybody. But, you know, just like with anything, I think it



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all comes down to the right balance. And a private conversation with a student is definitely different than the quick resolution you might come up with on the mat when you're trying to run a class. So, I think that they're all valid approaches. But just like the comedy, right? It's timing. It's the appropriate thing at the appropriate time that we all strive for.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Right. We've talked a lot about positive stuff so far. So, let's switch gears a little bit.

Mark Miller:

Okay.

Jeremy Lesniak:

We've talked about how your entrance in the martial arts came in at an awkward, maybe even a negative time, depending on how you want to look at it, and you've developed some skills. You acquired these tools that you were able to use later on. So, tell us about a time somewhere into your martial arts career where you had some tools and you were faced with another challenging or negative situation and how you worked on it that time.

Mark Miller:

Oh, man. You know, there's ton of stories like that. There's a ton of stories I think that wouldn't even be martial arts oriented. You know, I mean, everyday at work, everyday in my academic career. I'll give you a couple of stories here. So, the... We'll start with the martial arts story. I've been [33:56](#) on these non-martial arts tangents. But if you listen back to Terry Dow's podcast, it's a great, great interview with Terry and I have an amazing amount of respect for him. Terry and I started at this dojo around the same time. I would say within the year of me deciding to take martial arts instead of watching Charlie's Angels. And Terry for his reason, showed up at that same dojo. And he was a little bit younger than I was, right? So, I kind of... I think when I went through high school, when I graduated, he started. We might have shared a year in the same school but he was 3 or 4 years behind me. And if you listen to his podcast, he talks about being picked on, and he talks about doing that final demo at the end of his senior year and all that. I'm not gonna bore you with my story because it's the same with Terry's. But it was being picked on, I think, where I really first learned the power of the martial arts. And I had this kid when I was a freshman in high school that everyday in English class, he would come up behind me and he would do a essentially what amounted to double [35:05](#) to my neck as a starting point every single time in class. And at this point, I was a brown belt in Kempo, and I really



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wasn't worried about my ability to defend myself and he wasn't doing anything that was truly causing pain and [35:24](#) As a traditional martial artist learn, your last resort is anything physical, right? So, I'm not terribly interested in engaging with him. But I'm sort of interested in this hitting me everyday when he walks in class and saying whatever he would say. I'm pretty interested in that stopping. So, I sit down with my instructor at that time, and said, hey, at this guy named John O'Hern, who was a huge influence on me very early in my martial arts career. He ended up going to the military. And I said, look, this is the issue I'm having. He said, jeez, Mark. You can't sit there and let somebody hit you. Like, I appreciate you learning the teachings of the martial arts and stuff but you're not a punching bag. That can't happen, and you have to defend yourself. He goes, so, try this. Next time, I want you to stand up to him. Next time he comes [36:22](#) hits you, just turn around and say look, stop it. And if he doesn't stop it, turn to him and say, look, you do it one more time, I'm just gonna break your knees. I don't know why he came up with break your knees, but he came up with break your knees. So, next time I was in English class, I sat down and same pattern where he came in, he hit me, he started mouthing off. And in front of the class, I said, look, cut it out. I'm done. I don't want you to [36:51](#) anymore. Oh, yeah? What are you gonna do about it? You hit me again, I'm breaking your knees. And he kinda took a bit of a step back. Oh, I forgot this part. I grabbed him. I was seated on my seat and I grabbed him by the shirt collar and I pulled him to my face to explain the whole knee breaking thing, and then shove him back. So, there's a little bit of a physical presence there as well. Never would I have had the confidence to do anything like that before. And he sat back down, and the kid that sat behind him was a student of mine. I was already an assistant instructor and stuff. And the kid that sat behind him had been in my class quite a bit. He was actually a really good guy, and I saw him lean over and whisper in the kid that had picking on me, his ears, and pull back. And I saw a change in his face from whatever was going to a bit of fear. And he said oh, so you know Karate? Why do you have to use this Karate stuff, blah, blah blah. Just kinda trying to [37:56](#) I said, look, there's no rule books on fighting. If you're gonna pick on me, I'm gonna defend myself the way I defend myself. And he said, then I can do anything I want? And I said, you can. I could bite you if I wanted to? And I said, look, not only can you but I would suggest it because you're gonna need a lot of help if this goes down. I'll tell you what. You meet me after school. I walk home this way, I see you walking hoe all the time, and we'll figure this out. But I want it done. Once it's done, we're done with it no matter what happens. And I never saw him. He never showed up. I walked home for several days, couple of weeks in a row, he never showed up. I never really thought that I was gonna have to fight him, but I knew I had to stand some sort of a ground. I'm not so sure looking back on it today that I did it perfectly. But it worked. About two weeks later, he... We were walking... Imagine the crowded high school hallways. So, I'm kinda like shoulder-to-shoulder in this flow of the high school hallway and he pops out of a typing class and we ended up shoulder-to-shoulder, and we're looking at each other for the first time since this exchange. Oh, no. I'm sorry. I came out



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of typing class and ended up next to him. And he looked at me and he's like, oh, hey. I was like, hey. He was like, you just got out of typing? I said, yeah. He says, how was that class? I'm like, oh, it was a great class. And from that point on, we were best friends. All it took was that kind of finally standing up after quite a long time of him picking on me for him to change his ways. And I hope it had a positive influence on him. Because I never pushed it beyond that, you what I mean? All I wanted was for it to stop. And I think he realized that when we got to that place, everything was good. And that was it. That was the end of it. So, that's that story. That's martial arts working for me. And again, it's not all that I handled that well.

Jeremy Lesniak:

How would you have handled it differently?

Mark Miller:

I don't know. I mean, looking back on it, I think that you learn as a teacher that you praise publicly and you chastise privately. I kinda wonder if maybe more... If you could just read to it and tune it perfectly, if I don't go up to him outside of class, in private, and say, look, this has got to stop. If it doesn't stop, I'm gonna have to do that kind of thing and explain it out. I don't want to do it. It's not what I'm here for. I'd rather be your friend. We got there but I had to be a little bit more of a jerk than I really was comfortable with to get there, or that's what I did at that time. But you know, that's Monday morning quarterback that certainly at that young age, I wasn't on the [40:55](#) to do that. I mean, I've been attacked on the street and that I had the opportunity to do it, play a little bit more cool than before. But that was as an adult.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Right. I think that Monday morning quarterback is important.

Mark Miller:

Yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

I think that's how we learn, you know. In the moment of anything that's emotional, it's hard to separate logic from how you're feeling and...

Mark Miller:



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Yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Then only later when we've calmed down that we can really analyze, and I think that's critical. And it's something that far too few people do. And even in the context of non-threatening martial arts practice. So many cellphones now, and how often do people video someone in class and then show them and say, see, you are doing this thing wrong that I've been telling you for 3 years.

Mark Miller:

Well, you know, and I'd love to take credit for all that but keep in mind that everything I'm doing here is I've learned through the martial arts. I mean, even trying to handle it with finesse. I didn't... That wasn't just granted to me. That was through this great martial arts teaching and I've been so fortunate. Like you said earlier on, I don't know that I would know an instructor that would handle it that way or have the confidence to handle it that way. I would say the opposite. All I know is instructors that have the confidence to handle it that way, and that's what taught me. That's who I learn from. I mean, people like Shawn Flanagan, who I know. Again, Terry Dow, probably Allan [42:30](#) All these different people that you've had on your podcast may have reference back to Shawn Flanagan who's known for Yoshitsune martial arts and Kempo. The things I learned from him, the things I learned from John [42:41](#) the things I've learned from Terry. I mean, Terry went from being a younger kid in a dojo to an instructor for me, and somebody I look up to. The things I've learned from Craig, the things I've learned from John English who runs the KI studio. The things I learned from my current Brazilian Jiu Jitsu instructor, Chris Ward and the people that are above them. That's the gift of the martial arts. And knowing enough to handle things like that and to have that Monday morning quarterback insight, to try and improve yourself, it's by design.

Jeremy Lesniak:

And really, that's the whole purpose of what we do, isn't it?

Mark Miller:

Absolutely.

Jeremy Lesniak:



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It's that improvement.

Mark Miller:

So, I think I had... I don't know where you want to go from here. But I have...

Jeremy Lesniak:

We could go anywhere. It's been really interesting talking to you because we go off and we go on these tangents but they tend to circle back and they leave us back at this fairly neutral. And I definitely don't mean that in a negative way, but this very balanced place from where we could go in so many different directions again. And I don't know that I've experienced that. So, for me, as the interviewer, this has been really unique. And it's challenging my skills and I appreciate that.

Mark Miller:

Well, you know, I guess I promised you too that I was gonna give you another story that was non martial arts, or not specific to the martial arts. That was kind of me being... You know, turning into a little bit of a martial arts tough guy, if you will. The other one was when I was in college. I was going through a difficult time. My uncle had brain cancer, so he was... That was, like, a year and a half ordeal before he passed away. I had transferred from a two-year school to a four-year school, and then was faced with academic challenges that were, again, sort of beyond my capacity. And I had, through all this, I had been academically suspended from school twice. So, what an academic suspension is, is basically, you under-performed for the standards of the school. And they say, all right, you gotta take a break and come back. So, that had happened twice. And when they do it the second time, they say, oh, and by the way, you can never come back. So, I had a friend that was... Or my mom had a friend that was a professor at UNH. So, he gave me some advice. You could take a Division of Continuing Education classes. And if I could bring my GPA back up for The Division of Continuing Education classes, then I could petition to be let back in after this second academic suspension. And I can remember that there was a moment when I was walking. I was taking one of these Division for of Continuing education class, DCE is what they call it. And I was walking to class from sort of this off-site lot that you had to park at. So, it was a little of a long walk, and that was a good time to sort of think and reflect. And I had gotten a paper back from a teacher. At this time, I was actually in a studio arts program with a concentration of photography. In fact, if, going back to Terry Dow, there was a picture. I think he still uses this as a logo. It's a silhouette, and that's a picture I took. So, this is from my hobbies back in the day that I eventually turned into a



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profession and work my way through college doing. So, I was taking classes and I was taking a history of photography class. And in this class, I had to write a paper. And I really respected this teacher. In fact, it might not even have been in it. It might have been just a history of art class, but she was my history of photography teacher as well. And so, I wrote this paper and she was very honest. And the comments I... I got a really poor grade on it, and the comments I got back on were something with the effect of this is below high school level writing. You should be embarrassed, and you really need to figure this out if you're gonna be successful in college. This has struck deep because I'm already unsuccessful. And now, this person is being so brutally honest. It was the best thing she could have done. Because at this walk from the parking lot, I had this moment and it reaches back to the beginning of what we're talking about when I started to realize that I could affect change. So, I had this moment where I was like, wait a minute. I can do this. What I need to do is figure out what I need to do, what I need to learn, and figure out how to learn it. So, at the time, and this is still the case but not as badly, one of the consequences of being a poor student is I was a poor speller, I was bad at grammar, I had no idea how to write. I had no idea how to structure a piece of paper, a piece of writing - any of that. The tools to do that weren't there in my mind. And I said, enough is enough. And I rerouted myself to the college bookstore, and I went through all the books in the bookstore. And I said, there's gotta be something that can show me how to spell. There's gotta be something that can show me how to do grammar properly. I never learn this stuff in school but I'm gonna do this myself. I'm gonna take control of this. And I found a book on spelling. I found a couple of books on Grammar, [48:29](#) which I'm sure everybody knows, The Random House Elements of Grammar, and a Princeton book that was a grammar workbook. And I would wake up every morning and I would study these books. And I would... I had a roommate that was a really good writer at the time. So, I would sit down with him at everything I wrote, and we would go over it and I would grill him. I would say, why are you doing this? How do you use this? How did you note that? And long story short, or long story not as long, I learned this stuff. I never became a great speller, but I became a better speller. I actually became really good in grammar. Something clicked through all this, and I started to understand grammar, and I started to understand the structure of writing. So, I wrote... And this was the martial arts. This was my martial arts confidence and my martial arts structure working for me in a way [49:23](#) you know what I mean? And my final paper for her, it was a paper on Guernica, I hope I'm pronouncing that right, which is a famous painting that Pablo Picasso did. It was that war that took place in Mexico. I won't go into the boring details of that. And I wrote this paper, I worked with my buddy. He helped me through it a bit. And turned it in, and I got a really good grade on it. But the best part of it was that the teacher wrote on it, what an amazing difference from the first of the semester. This is a wonderful swan song to this class. Congratulations, or whatever she said. But she acknowledged the improvement and how good the paper was at this point. And it was just an amazing... I mean, it was really no different than struggling in the



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martial arts and having your instructor tell you that you're doing a great job, and you're ready to test for the next rank. I mean, it was that level of feeling. And I'm sure everybody listening to the podcast can relate to how exciting it is when an instructor gives you that validation that you're ready to test, and how nervous you are, right? Which is true. I was nervous because I knew I now have to live up to this level of writing. And I ultimately ended up publishing a magazine when I graduated school on arts, and writing a bunch of the articles. I actually became a writer through that experience. And to this day, I'm known as being a pretty decent writer. So, I don't have anybody... I mean, I have a lot of people to thank but I mostly have the martial arts, and the lessons I learned through all these wonderful people that have taught me wonderful things about martial arts. Tribute to that. And I think that, you know... I guess the theme here is, and the thing that I really... If there's one thing I can convey is that that's what the martial arts is. Martial arts is about how it changes you. It has nothing to do with your ability to fight, or I shouldn't say nothing to do with your ability to fight, but that's a really just a catalyst for everything else.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Such a powerful story, and what I'm most amazed by is that we've all had that experience. Even through those of us who did well in school had some subject or even just one paper, one subject within a subject that just didn't click for them. but in my experience, most people aren't going to throw themselves at it and adjust. They'll say, oh, this is just a thing I'm not good at.

Mark Miller:

That's a great point. Up until the point, I [52:16](#) myself at it. That's exactly what I was. I'm not a good speller. It was an identity. I'm not good at grammar; I'm not good writer. But it took a while for me to realize, the martial arts taught me differently. I always say to people, and this is what it could be because this is what it's been for me. Martial arts is like practicing all that information that you would read in a self-help book everyday. And that's why the self-help books don't work as well, right? Because you read it, and you kinda maybe try to do it and then it fades for you. But when you show up on that mat every single day and you're accountable, for the martial arts, you're... It's always top mine. You're always practicing. All you have to do is realize that it applies to these other areas, and you'll apply it.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Do you draw that connection for your students?

Mark Miller:



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Absolutely. Yeah.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Most instructors don't.

Mark Miller:

It's so important for me to do that. I don't know that I do it as well as I'd like to, but I'll give you another story, another example that... I have a student who, for whatever reason, just this absolutely wonderful girl, and she's definitely met her challenges in life - at home, at school, academically. And she's with having difficulty and really think it wasn't through any fault of hers other than her brain just didn't work the right way to do this. But she couldn't remember the patterns of a form very easily. And she'd achieved higher rank because she'd been ranked on other merits. But if you really look at just her forms alone, and I think she would admit this, it wasn't on par with the rest of her ranking. And you could tell that it was something that really bothered her. So, I pulled her aside one day, and we went through... I had some methodologies, some different methodologies, as you can imagine. Having to come up with these things for myself to teach people things. And she and I went to it pretty quickly, and I laid out this... Together, we sort of laid out this form and at the end of, I don't know, like, 20 or 30 minutes session, she was able to do this form and make every turn correctly, end up where she was supposed to end up, get to the end [54:40](#) hugest smile on her face at the end of all this. And all I could think of was... Well, first of all, was like oh my god. This is why I do this, right? It's to see this kind of look on a student's face. But also, that I know she's struggling in other areas of her life. So, I pulled her aside and just said, look, this isn't just Karate forms here for you. You can do this anywhere. So, when you have that challenge in school and the technique that we use is one that you could actually use academically as well. But, you know... So, I guess, to your point, it was really important to me at that moment to take that feeling and that understanding that she had. That wait a minute, I went from thinking I couldn't do this to doing it - not knowing I could but actually doing it to hold onto that so that she could carry that into other aspects of her life. And I hope that she has. But yeah, absolutely. I think that that's why I do it. Not just important, but it's the why I teach kids martial arts. You know?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah.

Mark Miller:



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Because it's a piece I was given that I want to give them, piece from that bucket, right?

Jeremy Lesniak:

Yeah. And on that note, we're gonna start closing out the show, because you just brought it full circle so beautifully that anything else I ask you will ruin it. And I don't want to ruin.

Mark Miller:

I have all this list of things prepared from that list you gave me but...

Jeremy Lesniak:

Well, good. Better to be overprepared, right?

Mark Miller:

That's right.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Let's look to the future. Everything we've talked about has been in the past. So, if we look into the future, what's in store for you?

Mark Miller:

I don't know. That's a good question, and that is one of the things that you sort of gave me a heads up on, and probably the one that I didn't... an answer didn't really pop in my head very well. You know, as an adult, the reason why I've gone to the martial arts is because of my kids. I had a... My oldest son went to the martial arts. he became a blackbelt, and it gave us a vocabulary. It gave us something in common. It gave us a vocabulary. I could say things to him and communicate with him in ways that other fathers and sons weren't communicating, because we have this common vocabulary - the martial arts and the principles, and the values, and everything that the martial arts gave. My youngest son, I'm proud to say - and I mean this, this is not a joke - I am proud to say, dropped out of the martial arts. I always told myself that I wouldn't force my kids into the martial arts. But if they wanted to do it, I would support them. And he... It was hard for him but he came to me, he's like advance green, somewhere in the middle of the belt ranking system. I can never keep track [57:31](#) systems. And he came to me and said, basically, he didn't want to do it anymore - talked to his mom, talked to me - and he



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loves to skateboard. And he wanted to dedicate his time to skateboard. And if you're listening to this right now, you're going oh my gosh, as a martial arts father, how can you be okay with your son not doing martial arts and going to skateboard? I'm here to tell you right now that there's no difference than martial arts and skateboard. He gets on that skateboard, he has a very serious routine. He falls off of it over and over and over and over again. He fails over and over again to succeed, to learn one little trick. And when he learns that trick, he builds upon that to learn the next one, by falling and failing over and over and over again. And to me, that's the martial arts. That's the thing that martial arts teaches you to do - is to create that path of success through failures. And he's doing that with skateboarding, and he's becoming a leader. He's inspiring me. I am 49 years old, I'm gonna be 50 in July. At 48, I showed up at the skate park with my son, and I've fallen down. Thank you to Judo [58:40](#) for teaching me how to fall because I needed it when I started skateboarding with him. But we go to the skateboard; I'm becoming a better skateboarder. He's a way better skateboarder than I am. So, I look up to him. I look up to what he does. And so, I think my path is probably to continue teaching, I want to get my blackbelt in Brazilian Jiu Jitsu. I've worked through Chris Wareham and [59:04](#) Gracie's system there. I love being a white belt at stuff. I love learning, and I've got a long, long path ahead of me there. But it is to with my kids, my family, my friends, to find these other pathways that are so similar to the martial arts. The skateboarders are like a modern day samurai - just testing their skills in different places over and over and over again. And I'm gonna do that with my son. I'm gonna continue to train Yoshitsune, and I'm gonna continue to give my pieces back to my students.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Awesome. And if anybody wants to find you online, how would they do that? Email, social media, websites - any of that?

Mark Miller:

Yeah. So, you can connect with me through either Fusion which is a martial arts dojo in [59:56](#) Shawn Flanagan, Chris Ward, Keith Walsh - all run a great... They do Brazilian Jiu Jitsu, Muay Thai. We teach your student to combat Jiu Jitsu, which is to the DePasquale family. My love for the DePasquale family and what they've given to the martial arts through that dojo. I also teach at Karate International with Craig Wareham, John English, and a lot of great people over there. So, I can be connected through there as well. My email is maxmarks, that's with an S, maxmarks.miller, M-I-L-L-E-R, @gmail. You can always hit me up there. I probably have Life Skills at the Dojo was a site I maintained for a while, that I haven't touched for a while. It's



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probably still out there as well. So, you can look me up through there. I'm on Facebook but I don't pay attention to it [1:00:48](#) but you can try me there as well.

Jeremy Lesniak:

Great. And of course, this is the first time we've said it on this episode, if folks want, we have the show notes. If you're new, you might not know where we put those - whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. So, we'll have everything that Mr. Miller has mentioned today over there. You know, I really appreciate your time. This has been a lot of fun, and one of the most challenging episodes for me not in any kind of a negative way. But just... We stretched a little bit and I appreciate that. If we were training on the mat, that would be pretty high compliment. So, I hope you take it in that way.

Mark Miller:

Appreciate it. Thank you.

Jeremy Lesniak:

So, one more thing before we head out, and I think you know that we do this. What parting words would you give to the folks listening today?

Mark Miller:

You know, I think I would just say, look, the martial arts are about so much more than what you see and what you think they might be when you look at people working on that mat. And there's no age limits. We have people that are 60 years old, that are starting martial arts for this first time. And we have, you know, the young tiny [1:01:53](#) coming in and training. And I just think that it doesn't have to be the martial arts, but the martial arts is a really, really good one out there to just go and practice those life skills. Really keep yourself a safe environment to fail and work on the things that you need to work on to be who you want to be. So, a lot of good dojos out there. If you're in the martial arts or not, keep doing what you're doing or try it out. It could just be a thing that you're looking for.

Jeremy Lesniak:

When I reflect back on this episode, I think the thing I'm most struck by is the awareness. The awareness for who Mr. Miller is, but more importantly, the awareness for who his students are - where they've been, where they're headed - and the role that he can play in guiding them. And I think that that's the word I most want to hone in on, is guiding. Not all instructors are guides. Some of them are sculptors, some of them are supporters. But here, and I don't want to



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pretend that any one role is more important than the other. We need all of them. But it's so clear that Mr. Miller is a guide for those students who come in to his life or whose lives he enters. And I am sure, because I've gotten to meet a few of them, that they're better off for it. Thank you so much, sir, for your time today.

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