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Staying alive, building a life after battling on streets



By Yvonne Abraham | GLOBE COLUMNIST MAY 05, 2013



DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

Jon Feinman started InnerCity Weightlifting in Dorchester where former gangbangers go to work out and maybe find a way to get out of the street life.

For more than a decade, the decisions he made as a troubled 13-year-old have defined his every hour.

He chose the street because it seemed easy, and because he loved it. And then, because he couldn't leave it: While other kids were learning the things they needed to be in the world — how to make eye contact, do math, drive — he was busy making mayhem, or being locked up for it.

By the time he saw the ugliness for what it is, every path out looked blocked — by his own limitations, or by other gangbangers, guys who walked the same streets he did, looking to settle beefs.

When you're that far gone, your only options are death, prison, or a miracle.

Joe is working on the miracle.

On a gray afternoon, leaden light streams through huge windows at a brick-walled gym in Dorchester. There are sounds of clanging metal and thudding hip-hop, of loud laughter and low, serious conversation. Joe, his long hair braided, arms sleeved in dense tattoos, pulls himself to the chin-up bar, over and over. He could do this all day. Around him, men jump onto high boxes, hit the floor for push-ups, snatch immense barbells above their heads. When the iron drops, the room shudders.

There's no sign in this unlovely neighborhood to mark InnerCity Weightlifting. Everybody who needs to already knows where it is.

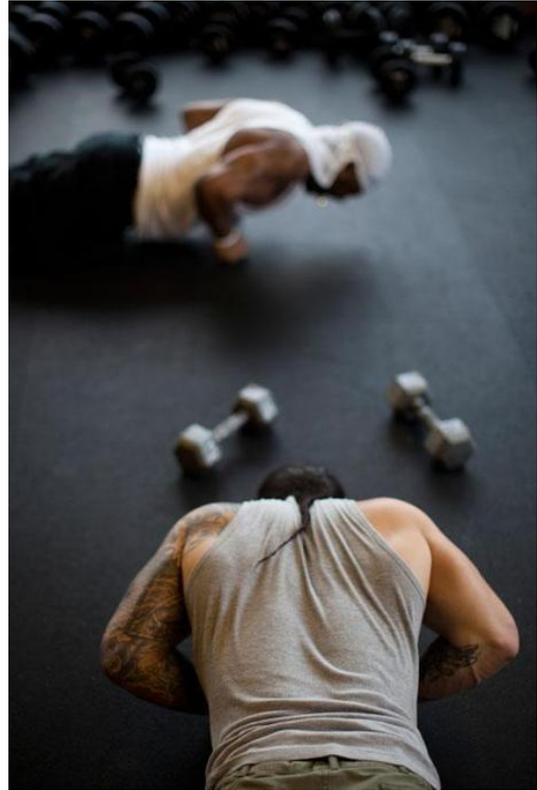
For years, many of these men, in their late teens and twenties, have danced right up to the edge of death, or to life without parole. They're the riskiest of at-risk youth, in so deep that hardly anybody can reach them. InnerCity is a way back to the surface. For the luckiest and most determined, it might be much more — a way into a world beyond streets that are their own kind of prison.

The men come into the gym because their buddies tell them it's a safe place to work out; they stay because they're surrounded by people who understand them. Eventually, they get to talking about the past, and the fragile future. Some pursue GEDs, or jobs. Some learn to become personal trainers, with clients InnerCity founder Jon Feinman recruits at corporate and philanthropic events with this simple pitch: Let our guys give you good, cheap training sessions, and you can help them find a way off the streets.

In the gym, you'll see professional, middle-class men and women swinging kettle-bells and jumping rope, being patiently prodded to give their all by muscular, heavily tattooed men. On both sides of the transaction, lives are changed.

On paper, Feinman, a 30-year-old trainer, has little in common with the men he serves: He grew up in Amherst, with all the advantages of a loving, middle-class white family. But the men who tower over him at the gym are devoted to him. Because Feinman has learned what few others understand: How completely they've trapped themselves by choosing the streets, how hard it is to survive each day, how long it takes to pull away.

Unassuming and patient, he has a knack for pushing guys just enough to inch them forward, gently connecting them with services, peers, and mentors who might help



DINA RUDICK/GLOBE STAFF

After years battling on the streets, Joe (in foreground) found a refuge and a purpose at InnerCity Weightlifting in Dorchester.

them. He convinces them he'll hang around for as long as it takes.

It helps too, that Feinman, whose size belies his strength, has been a competitive weightlifter. He can do things some of these guys can't, despite their years of working out. On Friday morning, he showed a few recently released men how to do overhead squats, hoisting a heavy bar above his head, bending his knees deeply. He guided them through the exercises, correcting their alignment, pushing them to bend lower, or straighten their backs. One man, his brow beaded, whooped every time he tried it, struggling at something Feinman had made look so easy.

"I look at Jon as somebody big, man," Joe said. "I see myself sticking by him."

When he started working out here over a year ago, Joe, who grew up in the South End, had been locked up for 11 of his 23 years. For a long time, the money and adrenaline were worth it. Then, as he sat in solitary after yet another turf brawl, the life he'd known — selling drugs, hurting people — suddenly lost its allure.

"Dudes come into your neighborhood and start shooting; it's every man for himself," he said. "This ain't the army. If I die, it ain't gonna be worth anything."

But you can't just wake up one day, decide you've had enough, and walk away. Your enemies are still out there. Moving wasn't an option: Joe had a daughter here, no obvious skills, and no honest way to earn enough to relocate. "You're gonna work at McDonald's? Dudes will come into McDonald's and shoot you."

He had nowhere else to be, so he agreed to come to InnerCity. He kept coming. In those first few months, Joe didn't seem like the kind of guy who would turn it around. Other regulars at the gym were far more social, more willing to talk, better at reading social cues. Luck alone kept Joe out of jail in the beginning. Despite his resolve in solitary, he was still selling drugs at first, still riding around with his old crew.

"I'd have them little situations, I could have gone to jail, but I never did for some strange reason," he said.

Nobody takes a straight road from gangs to gainful employment. To invest in men this

close to the edge is to sign up for serious heartbreak. Feinman lives in dread of the late-night phone call. Men connected to the gym have been stabbed, shot, arrested, and jailed. Feinman, his brother Josh, other staffers, and sometimes clients, show up at their court hearings, jails, and bedsides.

From a distance, it might look like coddling. But the key to helping somebody separate from the street is consistency — sticking with him for years, no matter what. Other outfits doing similar work — like Roca, in Chelsea, which has been turning around gang members for 25 years — have demonstrated this repeatedly.

“Guys will see right through you if you’re not willing to be there in the bad times,” Feinman said.

Feinman learned this eight years ago, as an Americorps coach in a middle school in East Boston. Everybody knew Elexson Hercules had joined a gang. He was a bright kid, engaging and open, but nobody could get through to him. He liked lifting weights, so Feinman suggested they train together. Eventually, their conversations shifted from lifting to life, what Hercules might want out of it, and how he could get it.

After his Americorps stint ended, Feinman began working as a personal trainer. He was making six figures, but it felt vacant. He couldn’t get Hercules out of his head.

In 2010, armed with an MBA, \$10,000 of his own savings, and a Commonwealth Corporation grant, Feinman began InnerCity Weightlifting, out of a Back Bay gym. Hercules, his inspiration, became one of his first students.

As with every gang member, there was no clean break: A few weeks after he started at InnerCity, Hercules was stabbed. He recovered, came back, began a GED. He was shot in the fall of 2010, but came back again. He held down a job at a restaurant, continued studying, became a doting father. At last, Hercules seemed to be on his way.

Word got around, among guys on the street, and in the philanthropic community. More men, and more grants, arrived at the gyms InnerCity was using back then in East Boston, Roxbury, and Dorchester. The nonprofit now has a home of its own, in Dorchester, and 112 men who say they want new starts; 53 of them show up regularly.

There are about 40 regular personal training clients, some at Microsoft in Cambridge, where professional and student trainers visit twice a week to run a half-dozen workers through burpees, squats, and lifts. More corporate gigs are on the way, which means more honest money for the guys, and earned revenue to bolster the program's stream of grants.

When the Feinman brothers pitch their services to companies, the guys from the street close the deal — standing before audiences, telling the stories of where they've been, and where they'd like to go, and how InnerCity has kept them alive.

Joe, whose start was so shaky, has become one of InnerCity's main public relations assets. After a few months at the gym, his connection to Feinman strengthened, and he began to see himself as a personal trainer. It dawned on him that he needed to make a clean break from his old ways.

“Spending more and more time with Jon, I started to get my mind a little different,” he said. “He took me to MIT and Harvard, and I've been around all these white people, these professionals. They didn't look at my braids and say ‘Who is this kid?’ They thought I must have been somebody.”

His 24th birthday, in October, was his first out of prison since he was 14. The day before, he sat in an office at the gym talking about how far he'd come. Happy and voluble, he said he had just bought a TV for his family with “working money,” earned training people, and from a maintenance job. He was studying too, carrying a book bag for the first time in his life.

People who have known Joe for years can hardly believe he's been out this long — more than a year of being a father to his daughter, of not slinging drugs or hurting anybody. He now trains 17 clients. He easily passed the first three parts of his GED, and studies every day for his math section on Friday. He is planning for college. He's learning to drive.

Still, despite his progress, Joe's existence is incredibly confined. He can't go to the movies or the mall in Boston. He can't walk where he pleases: Feinman and his staff

drive Joe and a few other men everywhere. He would not allow his face, or his tattoos, to be photographed, worried about making it easier for enemies to track him down. “I’m still fresh,” he said last week. “It ain’t like five years from now, where you can put my smiling face up there.”

For all of his work, success is still going to require extraordinary good luck — something Elexson Hercules didn’t have.

One night last June, Hercules was walking in East Boston with some friends when old rivals spotted him. He was stabbed five times and died, at 19. A friend said his last word was “love.” His father [told the Globe](#) he was killed because he’d agreed to testify against those who shot him in 2010.

“We have lost students before,” Feinman said. “But Elexson, in addition to being the inspiration for InnerCity Weightlifting, was very committed. He had courage and strength. . . . It hurt. But we could not be more proud of him.”

For Joe, it could all fall apart tomorrow. He might decide his new life isn’t worth the effort. Or he could do everything right, and still find himself sitting on a bus with the wrong person. He’s not naive enough to think good intentions will protect him.

“I think there is an end, but it ain’t nowhere nearby,” Joe said. “If my enemies keep doing what they’re doing, they will end up dead or in jail. And you can’t have a beef with somebody who is dead or in jail.”

All he has to do is outlast them.

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