

**March 18, 2026**

In this candid and deeply personal reflection, Master Mark O'Connor shares his experiences with bullying, exclusion, and seclusion, and how martial arts became a transformative force in his life. He discusses the profound impact martial arts can have on individuals within the neurodivergent community, as well as those who have faced restraint, isolation, bullying, or social exclusion; highlighting the confidence, connection, resilience, and empowerment that martial arts can foster.

## A Personal Journey

As a child growing up in the mid-1960s, I became the product of early private school education, an experience that no doubt changed me for years to come. For as long as I can remember, I was always a very shy and timid kid, even well into my early 20's. It is unclear if I was always that way or was transformed into a timid kid. I will never know, but what I do know is that my experiences had a profound influence on my life's journey.

I was the victim of humiliation, exclusion, and seclusion by trusted educators. I was made to feel embarrassed by teachers when they called upon me in class. I would freeze up when put on the spot to answer a question. I would feel myself turning beet red and cross my eyes; that was my coping mechanism. I was made to feel stupid and different because I was physically unable to answer a question. This repeated response in the classroom led to me being regularly grabbed by the ear and taken from class to class, being pawned off to anyone willing to take me. My teacher would ask other teachers if they wanted me because she did not want me in her class, as if I were something to give away. Most teachers declined the offer, so we moved on to the next class, all the while I thought no one wanted me. This often left me stuck in a chair in a far corner of a random classroom, with kids I did not know, facing the corner in solitude. I would listen to activities going on around me that I could not participate in, for what seemed like days. Being outcast and regularly smacked with a ruler was part of my typical private school experience, until 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, when my parents moved me to a public school, but the damage had already been done.

I became that kid on the playground who nobody picked for their team, and I had bullies' attention because they saw me as an easy target who would not fight back. Freezing up in class and being bullied continued to varying degrees all the way through high school (another terrible private school experience) and into early college, affecting my academic performance along the way.

Immediately after college, I decided to take martial arts classes with the intention of learning how to fight bullies and to take back control of my life. Our classes were quite

small, with a lot of focus on life skills. I quickly learned martial arts were not about fighting or revenge; it was about building confidence and security with who I was, and not dwelling on what others tried to portray me as. Slowly, my self-confidence was building up, my school performance was improving, and I subsequently completed a master's degree in computer engineering.

I retired in 2023 as a VP of Software Engineering and decided to focus my time exclusively on martial arts. I train constantly and took a part-time job working as an assistant martial arts instructor at a local school. I experienced something there that truly saddened me. One day after class, the mother of a neurodivergent student asked the lead instructor what my schedule was and whether I could lead instruction for the classes her son attended because her son really connected with me. The mother was told by the lead instructor that there was no guarantee of instructor schedules, and the school could not accommodate her request. This was told to the mother in front of her child, even though I had the same schedule for well over one year. The mother broke down in tears, desperately wanting to find a way for her child to fit in, and we (me included) failed her. I was quite upset about the outcome. Afterwards, I decided to reach out personally to the mother and tried to make this right for them. However, the damage had already been done, and they never returned. It made me realize how easy it is for any of us to change others' lives in a moment.

This experience brought back the traumatizing memory of being in the corner of a classroom by myself with class activities going on around me, and unable to participate. I could only imagine how a neurodivergent child would feel in a crowded class of 20+ students with high stimulation all around, forced physical contact with "high-fives" and pats on the back, feeling like they did not fit in. And in this child's case, finally finding someone they connected with, but then being told: "Sorry, we can't help you."

A couple of months later, I opened my own martial arts school, The Traveling Dojo. I decided to focus on serving underrepresented communities, and those that might not otherwise do well in mainstream martial arts schools, and so, that is our mission.

## How Martial Arts Can Help The Neurodivergent Community

Restraint, seclusion, and bullying often lead to feeling inferior, or the feeling of being powerless or trapped. Aside from the most common benefit of martial arts, building confidence in your ability to protect yourself, martial arts *in the right environment* can also help students restore a sense of control. It teaches the body how to move and practices choreographed, controlled movements and reactions, rather than uncontrolled reactions

stemming from anxiety or fear. These movements and practices help the student build and rebuild trust in what their bodies can do.

When taught **properly**, martial arts also teach boundaries and rule-setting regarding consent and contact, with gradual exposure to responses to physical stimulus, which can reduce fear or anxiety-driven responses.

The practical self-defense aspect of martial arts teaches situational awareness and ways to control your personal and verbal boundaries, while also exposing students to de-escalation techniques.

Martial arts and self-defense, when taught **in the right environment**, can also be very helpful to those who have experienced restraint, exclusion, seclusion, and bullying, as well as to those who are neurodivergent, where there is found to be a significant cross-section. The key aspect to this for the neurodivergent student is to find a school that will support their needs without making them feel different and not being focused on meeting the needs of the majority.

Some studies show significant [improvements in social behavior](#), [inclusion](#), and reductions in problem behaviors after martial arts training.

## How The Traveling Dojo Is Supporting AASR's Mission

We decided in January 2026, approximately 8 months after opening, to select a non-profit organization that aligns with our mission and core values. We made a pledge to donate a percentage of our NET income to the selected organization and to identify and collaborate with different organizations annually.

After doing some research on non-profit organizations to support, we decided to consult with the parent of one of our students about some more options. She is a licensed clinical professional counselor and works with the neurodivergent and LGBTQ+ communities. It is through her referral that we were connected with the **Alliance Against Seclusion and Restraint**. After reviewing the work that AASR is doing, I was reminded of my own childhood experiences of seclusion and exclusion. I was a danger to no one, yet I was regularly removed from class and secluded only because of my anxiety about being put on the spot to answer questions in front of the entire class. Instead of trying to understand me, I was removed because I behaved differently.

The fact that seclusion and restraint are significant issues in our society today is appalling, and I felt an immediate connection to the work AASR is doing. Having been exposed to exclusion, seclusion, and bullying for a good part of my childhood and having seen

firsthand the present-day lack of support for underrepresented communities, I realized there are a lot of synergies in our respective work. I saw that we are aiming to help the same communities through different approaches to create a safer, more accepting environment for this community.

[The Traveling Dojo](#) holds intentionally small classes with the mission of providing high-quality, low student-to-instructor ratios, focusing on martial arts instruction in a safe and inclusive environment. Our goal is to reach underrepresented communities and help them understand that they can participate in and benefit from a properly taught martial arts experience. We do not exclusively serve underrepresented communities; instead, we work to integrate all communities and to show we can all coexist by adapting our approaches and not being made to feel different.



## About The Author

[Mark O'Connor](#) is a retired Software Engineer, Software Engineering Executive, and founder of The Traveling Dojo. With over 40 years of experience managing diverse engineering teams in an industry that has some of the highest concentrations of neurodivergent workers ([technology & software development](#)) he brings a unique perspective to his martial arts business, an industry heavily commercialized and largely focused on mainstream communities.

Mark also has over 43 years of experience in six martial arts styles and holds a 4th degree black belt. He has seen firsthand the lack of support for the neurodivergent and LGBTQ+ communities in the martial arts industry. He has observed how underrepresented communities are treated in a mainstream martial arts program, and not in a managed or integrated manner (i.e., crowded dojos, high audible stimulation, lots of personal contact and lack of respect for personal space boundaries).

## Contact

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