

By Vanessa Geneva Ahern



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DR. JERRY WEICHMAN:

BORN to SOAR

JERRY WEICHMAN, PH.D., BETTER KNOWN AS DR. JERRY

to his teen patients and their parents, is a clinical psychologist and adolescent expert at the Hoag Neurosciences Institute in Newport Beach, California, and is on the board of directors for the Bullying Prevention Initiative for the State of California. He has counseled untold numbers of teenage clients on bullying, teen violence, substance abuse and some newer dangers, such as car-surfing. His book, "How to Deal," is considered a survival guide for high school teens and he is also a popular presenter at assemblies of students, teachers, parents and administrators. One of the things that makes him such a successful counselor is the fact that he has also been bullied — he understands what that feels like.

Dr. Jerry's earliest memories of being bullied go back to third grade. That's when the other kids found out about his prosthetic leg and started to tease him, calling him "peg leg." Born with birth defects due to medicines prescribed for his mother during her pregnancy, he explains that "I was born with a right foot with no bones in it and a deformed left foot. They amputated the right foot so that I could be fitted for a prosthesis when it was time for me to learn to walk."

Some might think Dr. Jerry is disabled but he certainly doesn't act that way. What makes his story so unique is the fact that he is also an avid snowboarder, heli-skier, surfer and mountain biker. To say that his story is remarkable is a real understatement.

He thinks he may have told his parents about the bullying at school but he really coped by just ignoring the kids who were bullying him. And as he got bigger, stronger and developed his athletic capabilities in high school, the bullying subsided. "Fortunately, I was blessed with athletic ability," according to Dr. Jerry, "and because the technology was decent for prosthetics, I was able to compete at the same level, if not higher, than the kids in baseball, football, and soccer, and make all-star teams." For him, high school was all about seeing how far he could take his athleticism, to see if he could take it to the next level. He says that "In the four years of high school I was able to cultivate my skills that much more and go on to play division one college football."

That didn't mean the high school bullying stopped entirely, though. Two bullying incidents in high school stand out in his memory. "I had one incident in my freshmen year where one senior was kind of pushing me around in the hallways. After the second time that happened, I clocked the kid in the face in the hallway and the whole thing stopped," recalls Dr. Jerry. He offers this as an example of how bullies think. They aren't looking for fights but they are looking to bully. For many of the kids who fight back, the likelihood that the bullying will continue is usually reduced. The bully is really looking for someone who won't fight back.

He also remembers a kid on his football team “ragging” on his leg and saying how slow Dr. Jerry was in front of the entire team, bragging about how much faster he was. Dr. Jerry knew he was in a good place with a good family and doing well in school, also on the right track for playing in college. With that, he figured it was all about jealousy. “I said, ‘Okay, let’s race after practice.’ The whole team stuck around, and we did a 40- or 50-yard dash together, and I whooped the kid,” recalls Dr. Jerry. “He stopped teasing me at that point and I never heard from him again.”

A junior year psychology class in high school planted the seed for his career in teen counseling. Even though he had a lot of friends and good grades, he didn’t enjoy high school. “I think we mislead our youth when we tell them that high school is the best time in your life.” He says “I’m guessing that for 90 percent of the kids, it’s a horrible time given relationship problems with parents, boyfriends, girlfriends, stress of school and academics, and then classmates putting up a great front, as if they have it all.”

“It was going to college, seeing how many more people saw you for you and who you were going to be,” that was a true *A-ha* moment for Dr. Jerry. College, he said, was “so much more mellow and laid back. Seeing that, all I wanted to do was go back and work with middle school and high-school kids, to be that beacon to show them what is over the wall.” He wants people to understand that “Bullying is bullying, whether it is for a gay person, being black, how your mom looks or telling a kid ‘you suck’ repeatedly. Ignoring it doesn’t get the job done. Bullies are looking for kids who will take it,” he warns.

“For a lot of the kids, I teach them to treat the bully for who they really are. These are kids who are really struggling,” adds Dr. Jerry. “Bullies don’t bully because life is good in their worlds. There could be trouble behind the scenes.” He suggests

to those being bullied that “Maybe their [the bullies’] parents could have gotten a divorce or they could have been abused as a child.”

Smiling is one approach Dr. Jerry advises teens to try if a bully takes a first crack at them. Smile at the bully and say something to make the bully see him/herself in the mirror. It lets the bully know that “what they’re doing is not affecting you, and that is the opposite of what a bully wants. For example, say something like, ‘Sorry you’re feeling so bad.’ Over time, bullies hate looking in the mirror. A lot of them,” he says, “will get over that and find somebody else they can bully.”

To emphasize how important it is for the person being bullied to take some action, he recalls one gay teen who was a member of the school’s track team. Ganged up on by the majority of the team on a daily basis, he was teased relentlessly. But he didn’t do anything about it and it wound up creating a huge downward spiral in his life. It eventually got so bad, he finally did say something to his coach. But once the coach talked with the kids, the bullying only got worse. As the teasing continued, Dr. Jerry recounts that “the boy gave up. He became negative, angry, depressed, his self-esteem dropped, his grades got worse, he was rude and defiant at home and he eventually needed to go to a wilderness program because he was stuck in that perpetual cycle and it kept compounding.” Dr. Jerry continued to say that the boy was “being called ‘gay’ and ‘fag’ and was socially excluded from team events off-campus. The bottom line is if the coach is not receptive to talking to the one being bullied, the teen and his or her parents need to go to the school’s assistant principal who is in charge of discipline.”

Dr. Jerry emphasizes that bullying is a repeated behavior and “teens have to learn how to deal with it. If it is repeated, and nothing is working, that’s when you call for help; you talk to your parents about it and then go to the administration and

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talk to them.” Many schools that Dr. Jerry works with have begun to address bullying in an anonymous way so students don’t fear retribution from the bully. For example, he says that a coach may take a bully aside and say “I’ve noticed that you are bullying kids.” He explains that “that’s how they address it so there is less likelihood of backlash.”

Interestingly, Dr. Jerry has both optimistic and pessimistic thoughts on the future of bullying. He’s excited that there is a really big movement to curtail negativity towards others and that plenty of teens are stepping up to do something about it. Yet with further developments in technology and kids still willing to conform to the latest dangerous trends, no matter what they are, bullying could increase. “Whatever the trend is,” Dr. Jerry says that “kids are in the middle of identity development, trying to figure out who they are,” meaning that a lot of kids will try out the trend-du-jour to be part of the crowd.

“The more we can teach kids to blaze their own trail, the greater the likelihood we have of not just of turning the tides of negative trends but instead, creating stand up individuals.” Dr. Jerry says that “I’m always telling the kids, why are you trying so hard to fit in when you were born to stand out?”

The technology that this generation has grown up with has completely changed the way bullies operate. In the old days (pre-Internet), when school was over, you were done with the school bully for the day. Today, Dr. Jerry says that teens return to the peace and security of their homes to find out that somebody has posted something offensive on their Facebook wall. Calling it a perpetual cycle, he says that “It is so much easier to type something mean on a computer than to say it to somebody’s face. But it is also easier to stand up to bullies because they are sitting behind a computer screen.” Since a lot of kids will stand up against overt bullying on the Internet, Dr. Jerry now finds that it has morphed into subtle bullying. For

example, someone will make a negative comment on Facebook about someone and that status will get 25 likes. The person being insulted will realize that a lot of kids approve of that nasty comment.

A sampling of the current issues teens now face include violence, cyberbullies, substance abuse, sexting, depression, academic performance, parental expectations, sex, eating disorders, body-image issues, stress-related disorders, relationships, behavior problems, social dramas and more. Dr. Jerry is most concerned about the violent teens he counsels where he sees a high level of self-absorption and lack of empathy or caring. He is distressed by how hard it is for these teens to understand how their violent behavior affects their parents.

When asked what the sports community can do to help, Dr. Jerry says “I think a lot of coaches need to talk about their own experiences with bullying. An authority figure like a coach gets put on a pedestal by some kids. You need to talk about what life is really about and inspire people to make the world a better place, not worse.” Since bullying can also negatively affect a teen’s ability to perform in sports, coaches need to adopt an open door policy for all their players.

The fact that more LGBT teens are coming out today is encouraging to Dr. Jerry. Saying that this is the first generation he has seen that doesn’t have the prejudices of their ancestors, he reveals that “it makes me excited for the future. A lot of the kids will talk to me about a negative comment grandma or grandpa made about a Hispanic person, and it drives them crazy. It’s like prehistoric to them. They can’t believe they [the grandparents] are talking like that.”

Throughout his life, it has been Dr. Jerry’s love of sports that has given him balance and joy in his life, his primary love being winter sports, particularly snowboarding. When asked what his first skiing experience was like, he revealed




Dr. Jerry addressing a school assembly.

that when he first put on skis and headed down the bunny slopes at Mt. Baldy, it came as a shock to realize that he didn't know how to stop. "Couple the fact that I was barreling down the hill with the reality that there was a U.S. ski team meeting at the bottom of the hill, I ended up crashing into a few members. Fortunately, no one was injured. Everyone in my group was stoked for me to ski in the first place. A few years later I tried snowboarding at Northstar-at-Tahoe and I was hooked for life." He revealed that making a toe-edge turn on the snowboard was a challenge initially since his prosthetic leg and foot are fixed at a 90-degree angle. But once he figured out how to get his weight over his front side, the problem went away.

It doesn't hurt that in addition to athletic prowess, Dr. Jerry also has a great sense of humor. He shared that besides crashing into the U.S. ski team the first time he went skiing, he was also "really nervous about my prosthetic leg falling off while on the chairlift due to the weight of the ski. In my mind's eye I could envision my leg in that heavy ski boot and ski barreling down the hill to the bottom without me. Fortunately, technology is on my side and that never happened."

To escape the stresses of his day-to-day life, Dr. Jerry loves "being able to strap on my board and ride like a bat out of hell through God's back yard and the empowerment I feel being able to be in control of myself and stop on a dime." He calls the feeling of freedom and being connected to nature addicting. And when asked about his most amazing moment on the slopes, he recounts a recent heli-skiing outing in the Whistler, British Columbia backcountry. He says the "sensation of being dropped off by helicopter on the peak of a snow-covered glacier and making my own tracks through huge bowls and sheer, steep cliffs in knee-deep powder was really intense and the opportunity of a lifetime."

Dr. Jerry's future looks bright, especially his sports future. He was just sponsored by Oser, a leading prosthetic company. "They basically built me the same leg that Oscar Pistorius has. They have me training for a triathlon and eventually competing in the next Paralympics. And as soon as they open up the snowboard in the winter Olympics, I'm there!" Way to go, Dr. Jerry — we'll be cheering you on. To learn more about Dr. Jerry, visit his website at www.drjerryweichman.com. 



Dr. Jerry Weichman

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