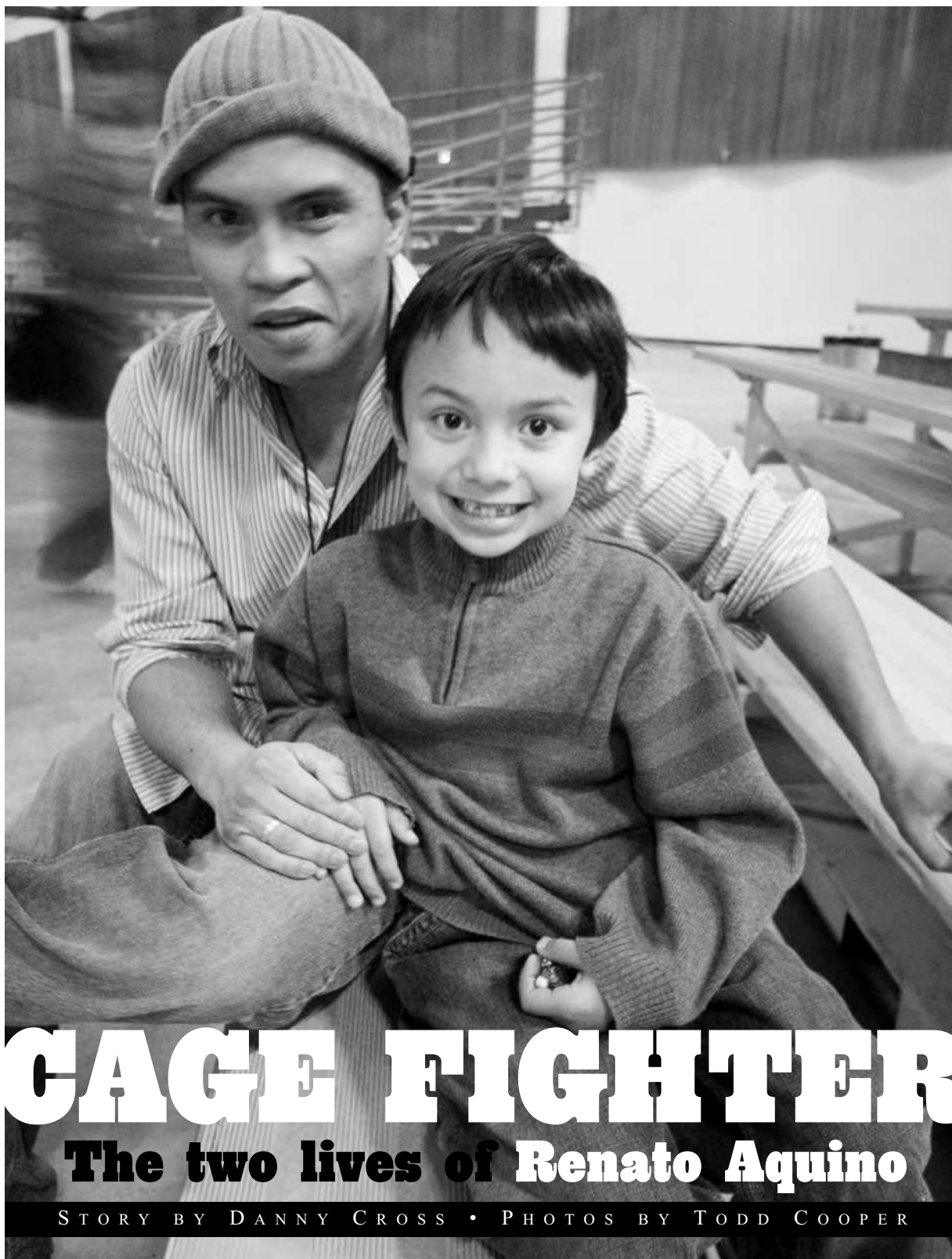




CAGE FIGHTER

The two lives of Renato Aquino

STORY BY DANNY CROSS • PHOTOS BY TODD COOPER

Renato Aquino's 6-year-old son was asked what would happen when his father stepped into the octagon at the Emerald City Cage Fights II, a mixed martial arts competition that wouldn't end until a participant was knocked unconscious, submitted or was beaten so badly that the referee had to stop the fight.

"He's gonna get beat up," young Alex said.

Standing nearby, his father burst into laughter and pleaded, "I'm supposed to win, man!"

Aquino wasn't surprised at his son's prediction. The holder of an average Muay Thai boxing record after 25 fights, Aquino had never stepped into the octagon for a mixed martial arts (MMA) fight before. Because he normally participates in Muay Thai bouts in Canada or on the East Coast, he decided to enter the local cage fight so his son could see him compete. "I feel like if you can explain to a kid that it is a sport, and teach them how to control their anger, I think it's one of the best things a kid can get into," he said.

Common perceptions of MMA fights are that the bouts are dangerously brutal, the fighters animalistic and violent. Steve Newport, who refereed the Emerald City Cage Fights II, says the sport is actually safer than boxing because the bouts are shorter and are stopped as soon as a fighter is vulnerable or defenseless. "Once the guy is out we don't stand the guy up and tell him he's OK and let him get hit again," said Newport, comparing cage fights to boxing matches where a fighter has 10 seconds to stand up and resume the bout after a knock down. "That's when the damage really occurs. When you're done, you're done."

Newport, who is licensed by the Oregon Boxing Commission as an emergency medical technician, explained that during amateur bouts there are stricter rules, such as eliminating elbows and kneeing an opponent when down, that further protect the fighters. Referees can stop fights as soon as they deem it appropriate. "My job is fighter safety," he said. "Anything in the ring, I have full control over that."

Aquino, 29, works as a caretaker for people with disabilities during the day and trains for fighting at night. He doesn't belong to a gym and conditions his body by doing situps and pushups and wailing on a punching bag called "Bricks" that hangs above the wood patio at his south Eugene townhouse. He learns fighting techniques through instructional videos.

Aquino doesn't have the time or money to invest in the structured training that the best young fighters arm themselves with. He works full time and has joint custody of his three children — one of whom was very wrong in his prediction of his father's first cage fight.

At the Emerald City Cage Fights II, held at the Lane County Fairgrounds in January, Aquino was matched against Omar Penland, a fighter from Medford who held a 1-1 MMA record. Regarding his pre-fight strategy, Aquino said, "Make sure I don't go to the ground, man. I don't want to get to that ground."

Aquino looked relaxed entering the ring. He jumped around, loosening his 5-foot-1, 140-pound shirtless frame. In the stands, his son and two clients, who he cares for at Alvord-Taylor, Inc. in Springfield, watched him fight for the first time.

Penland attacked quickly, shooting in on Aquino three times and eventually putting him right where he didn't want to be — on his back. Aquino fought him off by kicking upward from his back to prevent Penland from coming down on him with strikes. The referee stood them back up when Penland hesitated too long due to Aquino's upkicks. "I was waiting for him to shoot again [so I could] throw a knee but he went too quick on the shot, picked me up and slammed me right on my back," Aquino said. "I was going, 'Uh oh, I'm in trouble.'"

But Aquino landed enough upkicks to hold off Penland's attack. The referee once again stood them up and Aquino waited for Penland to take another shot at his legs. That shot came immediately, but Penland didn't get close enough to Aquino's body to wrap him up. Aquino grabbed Penland in a guillotine — an armlock around the neck from above. Aquino used his own weight to push Penland's head down over his locked arms, cutting off the circulation to Penland's brain. Penland tapped out almost immediately. Aquino ran to the side of the cage, climbed to the top and pumped his fist in triumph.

*'I like fighting in the ring
better than I do fighting life
because I can see who's
coming at me in the ring.'*

— RENATO AQUINO

Aquino, who hails from the Philippines, is one of Betsy Guinn's 12 adopted children. Guinn has adopted orphans from nearly every part of the world — Cambodia, El Salvador, Vietnam and Korea, to name a few. Aquino and his biological brother, Ray, were left at an orphanage by their mother when she couldn't afford to take care of them. Renato was 4, Ray was 9.

Guinn worked at a pediatric nursing clinic, where her job was to match potential parents with foster children. She had always wanted to adopt children of her own and soon decided that waiting to meet a husband was a waste of valuable parenting time. "I had wanted to adopt for as long as I could remember," she said. "I hadn't met a husband yet, but I thought, 'Go ahead and adopt, and if I met my husband then it would be the right one because he would love my kids, too. And if I didn't find him then I didn't find him.'"

Guinn adopted two boys from El Salvador, Mando and Nesto, before coming across Aquino's paperwork. She visited the malnourished child in the Philippines and eventually decided to adopt him as well. But before Renato would accept the invitation to join her American family, he demanded that his older brother, Ray, be adopted as well — or he wouldn't go. "I wasn't going to go without my brother," he said.

Guinn added them both to the family, which eventually reached 13 members — a single mother and 12 adopted children. Guinn says that while she would never have cho-