

In prison, Jennett got his priorities straight, but there's no easy fix for drug addiction.

"Drugs completely changed my destiny," Jennett says. Staying clean, he expects, will be a lifelong trial. "Our message to kids is you don't have to live like we did. You don't have to make the same mistakes we did."

Through his nonprofit, Jennett emphasizes drug prevention, but Checkered Past plays more than one note.

Twenty kids, roughly even numbers of boys and girls ranging in age from 5 to 14, filter into the Art of War MMA training gym in downtown Eugene for a Checkered Past youth outreach clinic on a sunny Sunday afternoon in late February. A banner affixed to the wall reads "Bully Repellant."

Amateur muay Thai kickboxer Chelsea Van introduces herself to the assembled youngsters and admits she'd been bullied as a little girl.

Van teaches the kids to throw kicks.

"A roundhouse is as strong as swinging a bat," she tells them. "That's how strong your body is. That's why it's important to take care of it."

Head coach Sean Clemons says his life would've played out differently had Checkered Past existed in Reno when he was a kid.

Clemons' mother died of a drug overdose when he was 8; he never knew his father.

Bounced from home to home more times than he can count, Clemons slipped through the cracks after he aged out of the foster care system, as did many of his friends.

"Reno's a tough place," he says. "I was released into the world with no drive, no role models. I knew I was going to drift into trouble."

Until falling in with a group of aspiring fighters at the now-closed Midtown MMA in Springfield five years ago, Clemons was a pugnacious drug addict cycling in and out of jail.

"We all have checkered pasts," he says, speaking of the all-volunteer coaching staff. "We were complete failures. We were the people you were warned to stay away from. We've overcome that."

Clemons says he didn't know what to expect when he signed on to coach the first Checkered Past clinic more than four years ago. He'd never worked with kids before.

"I'm nobody," he says. "The kids don't care who I am, but you can tell it means a lot that someone is paying attention to them."

Clemons and Jennett both downplay their significance to Checkered Past. "It's about the message, not the messenger," Jennett insists.

Still, it's difficult to separate fighter from crusade, as Jennett leans heavily on his tenacious, unbending reputation inside the cage to build momentum behind Checkered Past.

"We want to be a wave," Jennett explains. "A few years ago, we were a ripple in the water, but we're becoming a wave. If I didn't fight, I couldn't carry this off."

At 38, Jennett likely has only a few bouts left in him. What time remains, though, Jennett dedicates to reaching more people with the Checkered Past message: Our kids need help.

Covered in sweat, Jennett and Figuerva pant like sled dogs as they await the judges' decision after the Chinook fight, their battered faces streaked with blood.

Figuerva won by split decision, but Jennett had come too far to let this opportunity get away from him.

In front of 1,500 fans and tens of thousands more watching at home, Jennett taps the announcer on the shoulder, takes the microphone and turns a loss into a win. ■



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