

they've responded very well. People rise to the expectations that are set for them. That's always been my experience."

Progress is measured in very small steps. Gear describes one class regular who could not learn to throw a left hook. Finally, the boy's mother, who was observing the lesson, suggested he move his left foot at the same time. "As soon as he turned his left foot, his shoulder turned as well, he was doing the form I was looking for," Gear recalls. "That was a huge breakthrough, I could see in his face how happy he was at getting it."

Gear grew up in Madison, Wisconsin, where his father worked as an extension agent for the University of Wisconsin and his mother was a nurse practitioner. At the beginning of his junior year at Michigan, six months after the Rose

Bowl, he "pulverized" his liver when he ran into a retaining wall during pre-season practice. "That ended my football career," he says, "but it opened the door for me to explore as a student."

He took a creative writing class, hung out with a group of grad students, "read a lot of black literature" and, after graduation, earned a master's degree in urban policy at the New School for Social Research in Manhattan. Gear was working on Wall Street for Standard & Poor's, the bond-rating agency, when his wife's job with a financial services company brought the family to this area in 2006. They settled in Potomac with their three children, who are now in their 20s, and Gear cycled through jobs with Fannie Mae and the D.C. government.

Gear had always been a "gym rat," and

in 2013 he discovered kickboxing at the Bethesda facility where he worked out. "There were group classes, and for the first time since I played on a team I had people that I worked out with every day," he recalls. "I had an instructor who was like a coach, teaching us, and I was like, this really clicks, this really clicks."

Two years later, Gear decided to leave his job. He was 55, his kids had left for college, and he had reached another inflection point. "I woke up one morning and said, you've been an athlete all your life, do something in athletics," Gear recalls. "That's what I can speak passionately about. So I opened this gym."

Most of his clients are young professionals in their 20s and 30s, but his interest in autism started about a year ago when the mother of a teenager

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asked him to train her son and find an outlet for his restless energy. "I found that it doesn't matter how much a person lacks communication skills, or what their physical ability is," Gear says. "If you show them enough times, if you're patient, if you treat them like they're just...people who want to learn something and you stick with the learning process, you win people over. I've learned as much from them as they've learned from the process."

I ask what he's learned: "I think it's the patience level that I didn't know I had, and my desire to be a coach, to teach people and see them have success, and my investment in their success."

Boxing is a sport well-suited to autistic athletes because it involves learning basic techniques that are repeated over

and over again—throughout every class, every week. But there's a second goal, too: imparting confidence as well as competence, improving attitudes as well as abilities.

"These folks work as hard, if not harder, than our [other] members because they're filtering everything I say to them through a different lens. It's more difficult for them to take in," Gear says. "So there's that mental aspect. They feel better about themselves, they feel more independent—I can see it. When they come in and high-five people, they open up to a broader community. In a small way it builds confidence, it shows them that they can start something and finish something, and that makes a difference in how they interact with people."

One student who picks up the lessons

quickly now takes responsibility for helping others who need more time. "For the first time, he's in a kind of leadership role, a role where others are following him," Gear says. "His mother has told me he feels good about helping the other guys in the class, and I have to believe that's a great thing." Thirty-eight years after a brick wall and a bruised liver ended his football career, Gear is back in the game. But today, his joy comes from being a supporter not a star, a coach not a player, clasping the hands of four autistic boxers and saying one simple word together: team. ■

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