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Tae Kwon Do

& Autism

By Sean C. Ledig

In May 2008, seven-year-old Hunter Oliver weighed a mere 26 pounds. Suffering from epilepsy and autism, he refused to eat. The doctors already informed his parents, Scott and Tonya Oliver, that if he continued to lose weight over the summer, by September they would have to put him on a feeding tube.

Enter Master Chris Man-Son Hing, of Man-Son Hing Martial Arts in Tampa. A retired policeman, Man-Son Hing was acquainted with Scott Oliver, a special agent with the Department of Justice, through each other's law enforcement connections. Man-Son Hing suggested that the Olivers give Tae Kwon Do a try to improve their son's health. Man-Son Hing said he didn't know for sure if Tae Kwon Do would help Hunter, but he knew he wanted to try.

"I'd never met him," Man-Son Hing said of Hunter, "but I know martial arts and I know how

martial arts work. All the experts said they were at the end of their rope (regarding Hunter). I just wanted to give it a shot."

A year later, it is hard to connect that sick child to the bright-eyed, blond-haired little boy, jumping around, blocking punches and throwing kicks. Even things that might frighten other children, like standing on top of a heavy bag, balancing on one leg while throwing front kicks with the other, don't seem to intimidate him very much.

Outside of class, he speaks little, giving one-word answers to questions. But Tae Kwon Do training has served to draw him out, to take the edge off of his shyness. "When the other kids would kihap, he would cover his ears," Man-Son Hing said. "Now, he kihaps louder than anyone else in the class."

At first, Scott Oliver was apprehensive about enrolling his son in Tae Kwon Do. Working in law enforcement, Oliver has had martial arts training as part of his job. After seeing Hunter's problems with physical therapy, he worried that a martial arts class would be too rigorous for him. But his fears were soon put to rest. If anything, he was soon pleasantly surprised at how fast his son's health improved.

"After a couple of weeks, he progressed faster than with physical therapy," Scott Oliver said. He watched as Hunter learned to perform feats that most people take for granted, like standing on

Seven-year-old Hunter



one leg. What's more, Hunter came to enjoy Tae Kwon Do, whereas he had to be prodded to go to physical therapy. "He looks forward to it," Scott Oliver said. "He goes three times a week, but he'd go every day if he could."

Hunter always suffered from poor health, recalled his mother, Tonya, an attorney in Pinellas County, Florida. At a mere 15 months old, Hunter suffered a grand mal seizure. Shortly afterward, he stopped nursing.

When he was three years old, Hunter was taken to Walt Disney World, and saw singer Shania Twain in concert as part of the Make-A-Wish Foundation. At the time, it was believed that he did not have much longer to live. He was diagnosed with epilepsy at age three. In addition, his doctors originally believed that he might be deaf, Tonya Oliver said. "If the doctors spoke to him, he would just stare straight ahead," she said, "but loud noises made him scream."

Man-Son Hing knew that he would have to convince Hunter that it was important to eat well in order to learn Tae Kwon Do. He used some playtime with the other children in the class to help illustrate that point.

"I told the other kids, you can chase him, but you better not catch him," Man-Son Hing recalled. But as Hunter would tire, Man-Son Hing would tell him, "You're getting caught because you're not eating right. If you eat this chicken, you'll have the energy to keep running."

Man-Son Hing would then offer Hunter a chance to take a couple of bites from a chicken drumstick. Eventually, Hunter came to realize that: "If I eat my lunch, they can't catch me," Man-Son Hing said. Over time, his appetite returned. By September, he weighed in at 41 pounds.

"He's grown a whole uniform size," declared Janise Man-Son Hing, Chris' wife and co-owner of Man-Son Hing Martial Arts.

"He knows now that he has to eat," said his mother.

Prior to taking Tae Kwon Do, Tonya Oliver said it was a challenge to draw him out of his own little world. "He would sit by himself and not interact with the other chil-

dren," she said. "He was not doing well at school."

But Tae Kwon Do training helped change that. He sees Man-Son Hing and his classmates as friends and he wants to play with them and spend time with

them. "Now, when he sees me wrestle with the other kids, having fun, he jumps right in," noted Man-Son Hing.

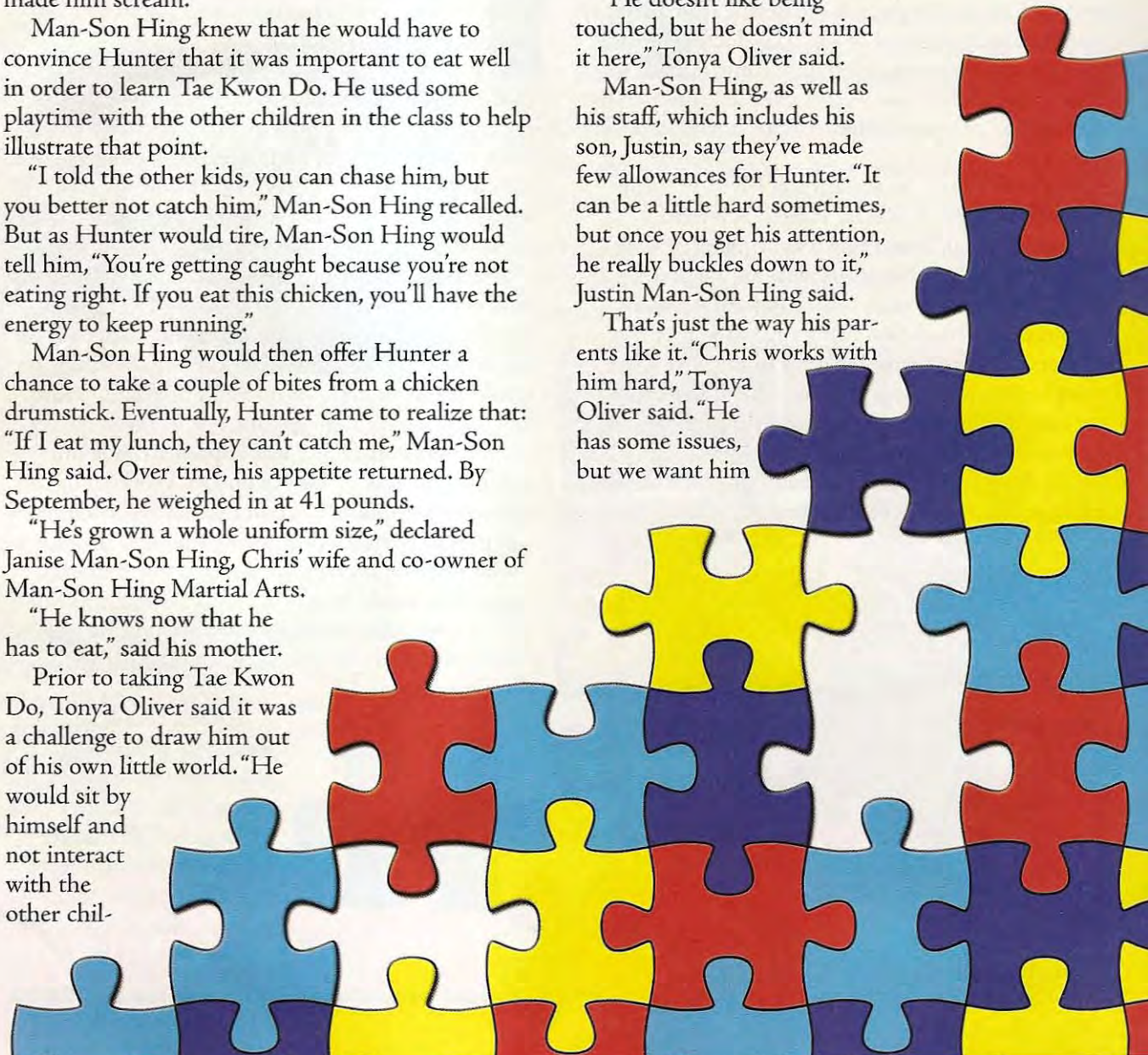
"He doesn't like being touched, but he doesn't mind it here," Tonya Oliver said.

Man-Son Hing, as well as his staff, which includes his son, Justin, say they've made few allowances for Hunter. "It can be a little hard sometimes, but once you get his attention, he really buckles down to it," Justin Man-Son Hing said.

That's just the way his parents like it. "Chris works with him hard," Tonya Oliver said. "He has some issues, but we want him



Hunter is practicing some reverse punches.





Hunter sits with his instructor, Master Chris Man-Son Hing, fifth-dan, of Man-Son Hing Martial Arts.

to do everything that everyone else does.”

The rigorous training has paid off in lots of ways for the Oliver family. “Chris just made him be independent,” noted Tonya Oliver. “Just last year, I was still putting a fork in his mouth. Now, he won’t let me do it. He feeds himself. And now he sleeps in his own bed.” She adds, “This year, they discontinued his physical therapy. They said he doesn’t need it anymore.”

Man-Son Hing said he noticed a difference as well. “He’s much more self-confident. If there is something he cannot do, he’ll still try it anyway.”

As far as Hunter’s mental health, Tae Kwon Do training has not only drawn him out of his own world, it’s helped him to take an interest in the world around him. For example, Hunter followed the 2008 presidential race. He knew who the candidates were and he knew that one way or the other, there would be a new president in the White House in January 2009. He also developed a crush on President Barack Obama’s daughter, Sasha, Tonya Oliver said.

Hunter eagerly looks forward to the classes. To Hunter, there are Tae Kwon Do days and there are regular days. “I have no inten-

tion of taking him out,” said his mother. “I’m not concerned with whether he gets his black belt, but I’m sure he could keep moving through the belt ranks.”

Janise said she’s glad for that. “I believe if he had to stop, it would be a major setback,” Janise said.

Scott Oliver also noticed that his son’s confidence has increased. “Before, he wanted us to do things for him, like getting him in and out of a vehicle,” he said. “Now, he’s like, ‘I can do it! I can do it!’”

Hunter’s not the only child with serious health issues who has been helped by martial arts training at Man-Son Hing’s dojang. Janise said she’s seen improvement in other children’s mental and physical health from the practice of martial arts. They have two students with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and one with asthma. The parent of the child with asthma told Janise that she’s saving money by enrolling her son in martial arts. “I asked her, ‘Why was that?’” Janise said, “And she told me it was because she didn’t need to spend money on inhalers anymore.”

For Man-Son Hing, those experiences and his experience teaching Hunter only shows what he’s always believed about martial arts. “It just proves what I’ve always said. Martial arts is not just another sport—it’s a way of life.” **TKD**

ABOUT THE AUTHOR: Sean C. Ledig is a Tampa, Florida-based writer, editor and photojournalist with more than 30 years experience in a wide range of Korean, Chinese, Japanese and Filipino martial arts. He holds several black belts, including dan ranks in Tang Soo Do Moo Duk Kwan awarded to him by Philip Suffredini of Connecticut and the late Grandmaster Jae Joon Kim of Florida. These days, he practices and teaches Classical and Modern Kung Fu, Jeet Kune Do Concepts and Filipino Tribal Arts.