

CPI *Unrestrained* Transcription

Episode 3: Michael Dorn

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Terry: Hello and welcome to *Unrestrained*, the podcast series from CPI. We're joined today by Michael Dorn. Hello, Michael.

Michael: How are you doing, sir?

Terry: I'm doing well, thank you.

My guest, Michael Dorn, has dedicated his 25-year career to public and school safety. In addition to distinguished service in law enforcement, Michael went on to become the top expert for the nation's largest state government school safety center that was located in Georgia. In addition to his duties as the Executive Director of Save Havens International, the world's leading international nonprofit camp and safety center, Michael has authored and coauthored 26 books on school safety, including *Weakfish – Bullying Through the Eyes of a Child*. He also has a new book entitled *Staying Alive How to Act Fast and Survive Deadly Encounters*, which we'll talk about briefly at the conclusion of the interview.

To give you a bit more idea about who you'll be listening to today, Michael's expertise has been routinely called upon by many organizations, including the FBI, the U.S. Department of Education, FEMA, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms, U.S. Attorney General's Office and dozens of state police and emergency management agencies and departments of education. His training videos are in use by more than 75,000 school systems and public safety agencies in more than 30 countries. So clearly Michael is no beginner and our talk with him today will focus on his work with bullying. Did I get most of that right, Michael?

Michael: Yes, sir.

Terry: Okay, excellent. I would like if you could describe for our listeners the basic symbolism in your book *Weakfish – Bullying in the Eyes of a Child*.

Michael: Sure. The analogy that I use is of a predatory and prey relationship between fish. I use an analogy of a barracuda, predatory fish, and how the barracuda preys on

those other fish that appear to the predator to be weak. They may swim a little differently.

So with children and with adults, it's those among us who may appear to those with some predatory tendencies such as someone who might bully on a regular basis, they might appear to be different in some way. It might be skin color. It might be religion. It might be the way we wear our hair, the student who makes good grades, poor grades, because they're tall, they're short, they're heavy, they're thin, the music they listen to, real or perceived differences of sexual preference. The fact that somebody is different and may appear vulnerable or uncertain can result in a child or an adult who has predatory tendencies to try to prey on that person.

In a number of instances outlined in the book, that's the type of relationship that there was in the children. So we feel it's a helpful analogy as we talk about how we can prevent a safety net, a climate, a culture where those type of situations are less frequent, less severe.

Terry: I see. Excellent. So generally, based on the predatory nature of these barracudas coming in and selecting, they're prey. I get you.

Michael: Exactly.

Terry: That's really interesting and one of the overarching premises of the book is the migration of this bullying behavior to adult institutions. In the book you write, a bully in a school can be but a smaller version of a bully of nations. Adolf Hitler was one such bully. More than 11 million Jews and other ethnic minorities would die so he could maintain control of his evil empire.

Talk about how you developed this fascinating premise and I'm wondering if you could expound on it a little bit for us.

Michael: Well, I owe that one to Dr. Jamie Cockfield. As I say in the book, I have a very severe learning disability. I was diagnosed with what they called at the time "profound dyslexia." A college professor, Dr. Jamie Cockfield, just by chance I had to take a college class, a survey history class, and he was the most difficult professor I ever had to study under.

Terry: Probably made it the most memorable too, I assume.

Michael: It did. I remember working on a Russian history final exam for six hours, just one essay question, and to be able to get what he called an "A++", which was he had a 95 for that grade scale, to give you an idea. But the gentleman challenged me a lot

and created in me, I think, or pulled from within me a love of history that I'd never before had. I had no interest in history whatsoever when I entered college.

I read voraciously, so I often I typically finish about two history books a week and I think in historical terms quite a bit and historical analogies. As Dr. Cockfield outlined throughout history for me the different people, and we wouldn't typically just call them bullies. They're obviously much worse than what we think of as a bully, but Adolf Hitler, Saddam Hussein, Mao, a number of different people throughout the history of mankind. There have been those among us who will prey to various extents on other people.

I think in terms of folks that have been persecuted as groups and individually, another book that helped, I wrote a chapter on was an excellent book by Dr. Carolyn Lunsford-Mears called *Reclaiming School in the Aftermath of Trauma*. She had two children in Columbine High School when the attack occurred and she went back and got her Ph.D. in psychology and wrote just a wonderful book.

She allowed me to write one chapter. She saw me present and she wanted me to talk about how I was able to overcome so many brutal situations and what carried me through. That's a theme of the *Weakfish* book and the presentation is how those people that reached out to me often, typically not having any idea the extent of what I was going through, but how much that meant.

I was actually having a great deal of trouble writing that chapter. And I happened to be working in Vietnam and I had a history book with me, as I usually do, and this particular book talked about those who stood by, in some countries, as Jews and homosexuals and gypsies and other groups were specifically targeted and murdered systematically by the Nazis and the other countries in places where people were more likely to risk everything to help those groups, the people that risked the lives of their children, their business, their very lives themselves to help, in many cases, strangers.

When I was reading that it just hit me, though the experiences I had pale in comparison to any type of genocide, it's still that you just can't help but remember the people who stood by and did nothing and you can never forget those people that, at risk to themselves, whether it be ridicule or physical harm in some cases, stood up for me. You just can't forget what those people did for you.

Just like the Jews in Israel at Yad Vashem go to great lengths to recognize all the people that stood up, even for a single Jew, they do everything they can to try to recognize those people, I think it's important to understand how much difference you can make when you stand up for someone. That's, of course, a very important message, not just for our adults who care for child and advocates of children, but for kids to hear.

Terry: Well said. That leads into another question about these people that did not stand by, these people that found it a moral compulsion to take action during some of the atrocities of World War II, those people who were committed. You say in *Weakfish*, you talk about school safety not being a one-time affair. Can you describe the shift in the mindset you would like to see happen with school administrators in regard to these safety administrators where the compulsion to provide safety and support is more prominent in their minds?

Michael: And I like what you just said – “compulsion”. If you look at Oskar Schindler, many people have seen the movie Schindler’s List, there’s a book I read about a Japanese diplomat who lost a child and lost his career saving an astounding number of Jews by issuing them diplomatic passports when he worked at one of the embassies in Europe in World War II. Of course Japan was allied with Nazi Germany so when he was caught doing that it caused some very serious repercussions, including the death of one of his own children.

But just like in the movie Schindler’s List, you see the profound impact that that man had with his passion for helping others and I think, again, that’s an extreme when we compare that to what an educator or police officer, health professional can accomplish at the local level, but at the same time it can involve the prevention of a mass casualty loss of life in an event. So the people and organizations that have that pervasive, they put their money where their mouth is and they just don’t talk the talk, they walk the walk and they create what we call a culture of safety in schools. It’s not just a one shot deal, we buy some equipment or we have some type of training session or what have you, but it’s a pervasive theme within the organization.

We stick to the key areas to school safety is general safety, which is where most of our deaths, unfortunately, occurs, or accidents, most commonly traffic-related accidents but also other gravity hazards, things like that. So we focus on general safety, trips, slips and falls and the things that don’t make the national news but cause a lot of pain and suffering in our schools and in our communities, the, of course, security, physical security, policies, procedures, equipment, training, those type of things.

Then there’s climate and culture, which a lot of people overlook but which are very important to all of these other pieces. The culture and climate that we establish in our schools for our students and our staff and visitors, and then the final area is emergency preparedness. When you see, whether it’s an independent or a public school system or a charter school organization, you see a parochial school where safety really matters and it’s part of that culture, that’s where you’re going to see the greatest achievements in safety. It does take that level of commitment and passion to make that happen.

Terry: So are you talking about a basic sort of culture rethinking, reorientation, a new way, a new, let's say, ongoing way to think about participatory culture in a school?

Michael: Yes. It has to be in almost everything we do. It's not that we have a safety department over here, we have school resource officers. Those are pieces and in the most successful schools that we've worked with in the United States and abroad, safety is part of almost everything they do. They just build it in naturally, just like a manufacturer would if they want to keep the injuries down, the worker comp claims down and they want to have a good safety record. It has to be part of everything they do.

Just like our airlines in the United States, commercial air travel is very safe because any staff member on a flight, any airline, can stop that flight. They have the authority. It used to be just the captain could stop a commercial air flight and we lost two plane loads of people in South America and one of them on the runway because the staff were afraid to tell the captain what to do. It came up on the black box. So now Delta, Air Tran, American, United, any of those flights, the flight attendant has the authority to stop the plane and that's an important cultural piece that they have as an industry and we can do the same things in schools, giving that type of empowerment to every employee.

Terry: I would imagine training and initiatives like that would be a good place to start. Of course, working for CPI, that's something that I gravitate toward.

School safety being a singular thing rather than some fragmented thing, I think that leads into a question I had about people that participate in making the school safe, the students. I'm wondering if you talk about some of the more meaningful anti-bullying student initiatives you've seen in your travel?

Michael: Well, I'll tell you, there are a lot of areas where we're very optimistic. School is a much safer place today than it was in the 1970s when most of what we talk about in *Weakfish* took place. It's all of those pieces coming together and student involvement is very important to those.

One of the most powerful initiatives we've seen is of course the Olweus bullying program, which has many student components to it. That's probably the most tried and true area out there. Just like CPI, you can go back and track and show that the training programs that CPI offers work. There's proof, there's evidence, and the same is true, it's a good equivalent actually, what CPI has done in the de-escalation area and passive restraint areas. That's what Olweus has done in the bullying arena.

Then we've got Stop Bullying Now, which is not a program but a campaign that's free to us by the United States government. It's an exceptionally good resource for our schools. There are components specifically for students, web course, because you've got to create the situations that I talked about before where students are going to step up to the plate and reach out and support and help. They do need training. They do need to be made aware, just like adults do.

So those most effective initiatives work very well there. When you see presentations like Rachel's Challenge, our clients have been very pleased when they brought in Rachel's Challenge. They very specifically focus on student involvement in a different way than I do with my presentations for students with *Weakfish*. So there's a host of those, what I would say are success stories.

When you go into a school that has the Olweus program and they've got Stop Bullying Now information out and they've brought in groups like Rachel's Challenge and made this a part of their culture, there's a definite difference. You can feel it, see it and experience it when you work in that school.

Terry: So you can feel the real culture change taking root.

Michael: Absolutely. I will say it's thankfully much rarer today when I describe my high school, Central High School in Macon, Georgia, what it was like in the late 1970s when my homeroom teacher carried a pistol and let us know it, let us know that he carried a Colt 1911 semi-auto pistol because he was afraid. They broke into a police car on campus in broad daylight, stole the police shotgun and a nightstick. The place was a circus at that time and it's a much safer school now. My older boy graduated from that school, chose to go there as a magnet school student. Much safer than it was when I attended it.

But there are still, they are rare situations, but we are sometimes brought into very troubled, failing schools that have massive problems. Often the climate and culture is a big piece of that. That's why we're often brought into help improve school climate and safety to raise test scores. That's one of the things that Safe Havens is known for, to come in and help schools learn how to effect those types of improvements to safety and security and climate and culture approaches.

Honestly, when you come in and you see a place that you just go to yourself, "This is really dysfunctional, it's really that bad," you're not going to see things like Olweus in use and CPI training. They're often not focusing on evidence-based approaches. Things are done, "Well, we think this will work. We think that'll work," but there's not as much of a studied approach. You're not going to typically see things like PBIS, for example, in those schools.

Terry: I wonder how to reach these people.

Michael: Well, the way we try to do it is we try, when we interact with the media, to get a more accurate perception across but the most effective things, of course, what we do when we come in and keynote conferences and do training and we do assessments, we're very fact-based. We lay things out.

One of the things that we describe a lot in our keynotes currently, we're talking a lot about something called "Fear Management Theory". A lot of the efforts to enhance school safety since Sandy Hook are either not proven to work, the money, the time, the energy that's been spent. They're not validated as effective or that they've been shown to be counterproductive.

We have right now one training methodology that's very popular out there where you teach people to attack an active shooter as a last resort. There are probably a dozen such programs, but one in particular is very popular right now. It's not evidence-based, and we know for a fact, we verified with an insurance carrier, just in the state of Iowa, just in the last 20 months, that one carrier has paid over \$300,000 in emergency room visits alone – now, this is one insurance carrier, one state, \$300,000. That doesn't count the surgeries, physical therapy, lawsuits that are coming down the pike. That'll end up being several million dollars.

Terry: That's just ER.

Michael: And that's just ER visits. This is a fear-based reaction. People that embrace this training, it's just a mode of thinking. It's exaggerated, twisted statistical data and it's not an evidence-based approach. It's never been validated but there's so much of that training that we've got those kinds of claims just from injuries during the training and it's to teach people a concept that's never once been proven to work.

What we try to do is teach them about fear management theory. Fear management theory, what it explains is that it is very natural for an educated, caring educator, police chief, mental health professional, parent to focus too much on certain frightening aspects. It makes us believe that something like Sandy Hook or Columbine is more likely to happen to us than it really is, and it can distract us and focus on things that are not the most important aspects that we learn from those types of tragedies. We miss, often, the simple and powerful tools that are proven to work to prevent those types of tragedies. Does that make sense?

Terry: Yes, it does. A reactionary response to horrific violence that is emotionally-led rather than evidence-based is going to mislead.

Michael: We do an activity when I teach. I just did this at an independent school down in Florida the week before last and I just did it in Oregon this week where I do an activity at the beginning and I say, "What wild animal kills the most people every

year in the United States?” and they say, bear, shark, wolf. Then we show them the actual data. I think it’s 4.2 fatal shark attacks annually, on average, over the last 50 years worldwide, not just in the U.S. Like one fatal bear attack per, year but we have, I think it’s 150 fatalities from collisions with white-tailed deer. But we don’t lie awake at night having a nightmare about white-tailed deer.

Terry: Right. Right.

Michael: So it’s the same thing. It helps people, I think to understand the research explains why that’s a perfectly normal reaction, but at the same time, we have to get balance and we have to focus on a balanced view of what our real risks are.

When Steve Satterly did his paper on relative causes of death, active shooters, 63 deaths in the U.S. in the last 15 years. In contrast to the 1958 school fire attack at a Catholic school in Illinois, 95 killed with a book of matches. One hundred twenty-nine deaths from on campus suicide during the same 15-year period tells us that you’re 8 times more likely to have a completed suicide on school property than an active shooter. We don’t want to ignore active shooters. It’s definitely one of the things that we have to look at, but we’d better deal with the things that we will have.

That’s one of the things that I like so much about what CPI does. You may have a major act of violence and you’d better train and prepare for that. But you will have custody issues, you’ll have people come into a school office that are upset. You’ll have students who have major control issues and those things are real. They’re going to happen and they can lead to bigger things so let’s use evidence-based approaches to prepare for the “what is,” along with the “what ifs.”

Terry: I see. Excellent. In *Weakfish*, one of the things that really intrigued me, you wrote that one useful approach is to have faculty and staff members in a school attempt to identify those youth who do not seem to have a place in the school. I went to high school in the ‘70s myself and I really wish there might have been somebody like that, but in that time and place it wasn’t thought of. How realistic is that in today’s schools?

Michael: It’s real realistic. Sometimes you meet people and you think later, “Why didn’t I get more information from them?” I’ll keynote and all these people come up, talking to me. And I’ll talk to people briefly, but I had a superintendent in North Carolina come up and I should have jotted down her data and more of her methodology, but in a nutshell what she told me they had done in her district, they took a photograph of every student in the school based on the Student ID system that they had and they blew those up a little bit and they posted them on the wall in, I think, the gymnasium.

So you've got this wall of maybe 800 photographs. They all have space between the photos. I think they put them all on a sheet of paper. Then they gave their staff sheets of it may have been gold stars or yellow dots, it doesn't matter, some type of visual sticker. They gave them about a half an hour and they said, "Go along that wall and put a sticker next to each student that you know them by name and you have a rapport with them, that you can see them in the hall and say, "Hello, Nancy," and you know who they are and you know something about them and you have a conversational rapport with them.

They did that activity and came back and what they noticed is the stellar students and the athletes had just dots everywhere or markers. Then there were 5 or 10 kids that didn't have a single sticker. Those kids are Luke Woodham from Pearl, Mississippi, who had no connection with any staff in the building and that's what his answer to Secret Service was in the taped interview.

I asked him, "What could the school have done? What would have happened if we had metal detectors?" "Well, I would have shot them in the parking lot." "What about this?" "Well, I would have just done that." But when I asked Luke what the school could have done he said, "It's not their fault." He said, "I'm not blaming the school," and I'm not either. But he said his life was so dysfunctional and so messed up he didn't have a connection with a single caring adult, had they just talked to him.

So when they do this activity at the school, what they said is they then targeted those students who had no stickers with attention, just positive, simple, "Hey, this kid, I want you to find out their name and speak to them." She reported a dramatic improvement in test scores and an over 25% drop in student disciplinary actions. So there are really relatively simple ways that you can increase connectivity in a school and dramatically improve that school.

One of our clients we love to work with is Clark County Public School District out in Las Vegas and they've got the Sharp System that they've developed, which is using a software that their local police department has and they do spatial mapping where a select group of kids come in, they teach them how to use the software system and they basically take schematics of the building and put different colored dots for different types of activities like bullying and gang activity at different times of day. Then they improve student supervision of those areas and they received some dramatic reductions in expulsions and victimization from victimization surveys, long-term expulsions as well as suspensions, just by getting that feedback from their students and improving supervision in those areas.

Terry: What a great idea to sort of map out the physical plant of a school and say, "By these dots, here are the warning areas, areas to avoid or to police more aggressively."

Michael: Certainly. And it's amazing how little that approach cost them for a district that's 300,000 students and how massive the impact has been.

Terry: That's an excellent point. Your economics can't be an excuse for inaction at that point because of the very modest cost for supplies. I guess time at that point would be your most meaningful investment.

Michael: Well, and in their case, many years ago when I first started working with them, so probably 10, 15 years ago, I remember they had the world's largest school security camera installation in that same district. I believe it was \$56 million in one year. They got big dividends from that investment but nowhere close to what they've gotten from the Sharp System. I think the total cost for that was something like \$12,000, compared to \$56 million. Do you follow?

Terry: I do. Pennies on the dollar comes to mind.

Michael: Yeah, so it goes back to, let's use heart, let's use mind, but let's use data too and let's look at what's proven to work and then implement it.

Terry: Absolutely. Well, that's a good lesson for our listeners, to be sure. I'm wondering if you can tell me right now about some of the things that . . . I want to touch on two things before we close today, Michael. One, you've got a new book out called *Staying Alive: How to Act Fast and Survive Deadly Encounters*. Do you want to tell our listeners a little bit about that?

Michael: Yeah, as you can tell, I like writing books. I've got the ability to read now thanks to the intervention in Alabama. It would be like sitting around the house after you were given back legs if you were born without them. So I read and write voraciously.

This book is a pretty special book to us. Barron's, a very respected publisher, asked us to write the most thoroughly researched book on life and death decision-making and detection to danger in print. I had a great coauthoring team of five people – Dr. Sanea Shephard, my son, Chris Dorn, Steve Satterly up in Indiana, and Fung Wen was our content editor to merge all the thoughts, if you will.

It was designed to be a book you can read in just a few hours. It's a great book. One of the cool things about it, our focus as a nonprofit is to put out free resources, so our video unit, we basically invested somewhere probably between a quarter of a million and \$300,000 and put about an hour's worth of free HD videos on our website and downloadable posters and things like that.

Terry: Could you tell our listeners the address of your website?

Michael: Oh, sure. Yes, it's www.safehavensinternational.org. You can also just Google my name, "Mike Dorn" and it'll come up, The Mike Dorn School of Safety. You go to the homepage of Safe Havens International website, you'll see the book cover in a couple places. In either place just click on that and it'll take you to the videos and there's some really awesome videos about evidence-based and research-based approaches, like mental stimulation, pattern matching and recognition was another great way to connect the kids and be able to spot children in need or a dangerous situation. So we're real excited, as you can tell, about the book and getting great reviews on it.

Terry: Excellent. I appreciate you talking to us about it. I'm going to ask you a final question here. You see a child engaging in bullying behavior and you can say one sentence to him or her. What would it be?

Michael: I'll work with you as long as it takes to improve this situation. Don't give up on me or yourself.

Terry: Excellent. That's a great technique.

Michael: That's kind of a long sentence.

Terry: No. That's a great takeaway. I thank you for letting me put you on the spot with that last question. You definitely rose to the occasion. It's a really, really good, memorable takeaway.

Michael, I want to thank you for the interview today.

Michael: Thank you. It's an honor and a privilege and we appreciate the work that you guys are doing out there. We hear, just last week a client has a number of CPI instructors and they were raving about the results they've gotten. The other folks out there that focus on proof and evidence-based approaches where things are done carefully, thoughtfully through research, it makes the world go round and makes the world safer and makes our schools more productive. So it's our honor to be allowed to be on this podcast.

Terry: Excellent. And our honor to have you as well. Michael, I want to thank you for joining us today on Unrestrained, the CPI podcast series. And safe travels to you.

Michael: Thank you, sir.

Terry: All right, Michael, goodbye.