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GAITHERSBURG • MONTGOMERY VILLAGE

Learning about respect, one punch at a time



DAVID S. SPENCE/THE GAZETTE

Bang Nguyen, a substitute teacher and martial arts instructor, stresses harmony over harm.

After school, teaching life lessons through martial arts

BY JAIME CIAVARRA
STAFF WRITER

After a neighborhood fight, with a sore body and bruised ego, 17-year-old Marcos Moya joined a martial arts class in January to learn self defense.

Now that he has practiced kicks, punches and the proper Kung Fu stance, Moya hopes to never have to use them.

"Fighting is a last resort," said the El Salvadoran immigrant, pushing hair out of his eyes. "There are other ways to solve a problem."

That is the mantra of about 20 Gaithersburg High students who have studied for months under Bang Nguyen, a substitute teacher and martial arts instructor who stresses harmony over harm.

Fed up with police gang reports and inspired by community meetings calling for action, Nguyen began an after-school martial arts program for Gaithersburg students in December to help build students' self confidence and respect.

Educators are touting the class, which ended last week, as a major success in keeping at-risk kids motivated and involved

after school.

Next year, it will vie for county gang-prevention funding, as some say the program is already showing positive results.

"The correlation between this class and better behavior among some of these kids is astounding," said Brenda Wilks, assistant principal at Gaithersburg High.

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MARTIAL ARTS

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Those with poor attendance began going to class, she said. Some feeling the pressure to fit in with gangs refrained, students testified. And others, like Moya, saw their grades improve as they looked forward to attending school.

Nguyen, a graduate student at Johns Hopkins University, said the course was a natural fit for students at diverse Gaithersburg High, where more than 60 percent of the population is made up of minorities.

"We all come from different backgrounds," said Nguyen, a Vietnamese immigrant. "But this, it bonds us together. Our differences don't matter."

As a substitute teacher for English for Speakers of Other Languages classes at the school, Nguyen invited his students to the Bohrer Activity Center once a week for one and

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Bang Nguyen, martial arts instructor

a half-hour training sessions.

The courses included in-depth discussions on respect, leadership, responsibility and nonviolence, and then the group of 20 hit the mats.

Nguyen, a 54-year-old who looks and moves like he's 20, lives and breathes martial arts, he says.

He began studying it at age 12 in his native Vietnam and has taught courses — from Kung Fu to Aikido to Judo — for nearly four decades.

While the course may apply to many at

Gaithersburg High, Wilks said it has been particularly successful with ESOL students, most of whom are immigrants sometimes struggling to fit in.

A large problem, Wilks said, is that many ESOL students often have trouble meeting academic eligibility requirements for after school activities and sports. This provided a group for kids to feel part of — away from the lure of gangs, drugs or other risky behavior.

"That is so important to kids who may feel lost," she said.

About half of the participants were African immigrants, the other half were Hispanic.

Next year, Nguyen wants his students to return to the sessions, along with more kids who need a chance to participate in something constructive.

Tracey Webb, program monitor for Montgomery County Collaboration Council, an organization that helps initiate and fund programs for youth and families, says the class has a good shot at receiving a \$5,000 or more county grant to build onto the program.

The Collaboration Council board will decide this summer, she said.

Students who attended the program's party last week said they were disappointed the class had ended until next school year.

It doesn't matter, Nguyen says. The teachings will always hold true.

"Martial arts, the meaning of it and how you conduct yourself, is a way of life," he said, smiling.