

COMMUNITY NEWS

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From one child to another, fighting for respect

■ Martial arts class for at-risk youth expands to middle, elementary schools

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There was a time when 17-year-old Sonia Alvarado wouldn't think twice about throwing a punch.

But after a year of martial arts training, the El Salvadoran immigrant has learned that there are other ways to solve a problem. Her frustration and temper have given way to self-confidence and respect.

"Before I would get into fights over nothing," said Alvarado, a Gaithersburg High School junior. "I've learned to control my body, think before I act."

Now Alvarado is one of four Gaithersburg High students in the after-school program who are preparing to teach younger children their successful moves, both on and off the mats.

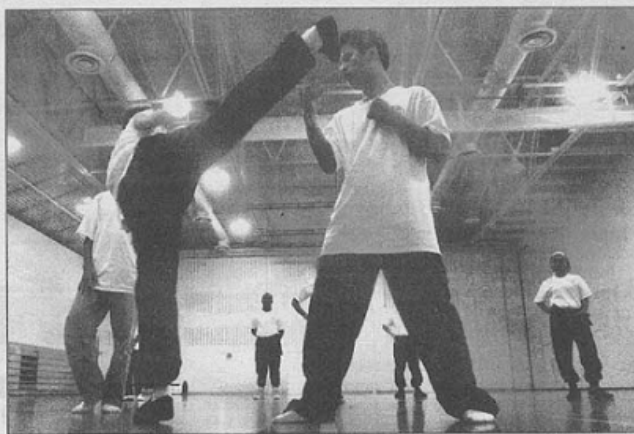
A martial arts class for at-risk teens, which started at Gaithersburg High last year, is expanding next month to Forest Oak Middle School and Summit Hall Elementary School under an \$18,000 grant funded through the joint county gang prevention initiative.

High school students who have excelled in the pilot program will help lead the way in the other Gaithersburg schools by demonstrating Kung Fu and Tae Kwon Do. More importantly, they will teach the basic principals of martial arts by stressing discipline, respect and harmony over harm.

Youth providers say the program fulfills a niche by providing a positive place for kids to hang out after-school — away from the lure of gangs, drugs or other risky behavior.

There is a need for that, they say.

In a recently released study conducted by Identity, a Gaithersburg nonprofit



J. ADAM FENSTER/THE GAZETTE

Instructor Bang Nguyen (left) of Gaithersburg teaches Han Bai Kung Fu to Gaithersburg High School student Fu Chen at Boher Activity Center in Gaithersburg.

organization, half of the 1,014 Latino youth in the county surveyed said they had a friend who was or is in a gang. Seven percent — or 70 teens — said they had joined a gang themselves. And 24 percent said a gang has tried to recruit him or her on the streets, at school or at a party.

Some surveyed said they were as young as 10 years old.

"It's clear that there is a big gap about how we're connecting with kids, especially in out-of-school activities," said Luiz Cardona, Montgomery County's Youth Violence Prevention Coordinator. "The old traditional term of youth development needs to be fine-tuned. We need to be able to bridge that gap."

The martial arts program — led by instructor and Summit Hall Elementary

school teacher Bang Nguyen and spear-headed by community activist Nguyen Minh Chau — has been touted as a major success at the high school level.

Last spring Gaithersburg High School Vice Principal Brenda Wilks said the correlation between the program and better behavior among the students was remarkable.

About 15 students have gone through the program.

Those with poor attendance began going to class, she said, and others struggling with school saw their grades improve.

Most notably, youth providers said, there is no academic eligibility requirement for the program. Anyone can join.

"They can learn a lot of things from us. They can see that we stay away from bad people and focus on doing good," said Mous-

NOT JUST FOR KICKS

A martial arts class that teaches discipline, self-confidence and respect is expanding to Forest Oak Middle School and Summit Hall Elementary School in Gaithersburg. Participation in the after-school program is free. Students at those schools interested in signing up should contact lead organizer Chau at 301-933-2738 or nmchau37@yahoo.com

sa Diarra, 17, an immigrant from the Ivory Coast who is preparing to be an instructor.

He also credits the class with helping him focus on schoolwork.

Although the program was initially designed for at-risk youth, any student in the Gaithersburg schools is eligible to participate, Chau said. They are looking for about 15 students to sign up.

Money from the grant will be used to transport the high school instructors to the middle and elementary school gyms. A bus will also be provided to take students home afterwards.

There will be six sessions at Summit Hall and 12 sessions at Forest Oak starting in January.

The expansion of the program will fill a gap at the often-contentious middle school level and at elementary schools, where gang resources are not typically targeted, Chau added.

She hopes the high school students' stories will be inspiring to those who might be choosing the wrong path.

Students like Alvarado and Diarra will be proud to step in front of the younger ones, ready to be the role models that they are, she said.

"The motto here is for the kids to take care of each other," Chau said.