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The Jewish Planet

Connecting our Communities

Complimentary

www.TheJewishPlanet.com

Vol. 2. No. 13

7 Cheshvan 5769

November 5, 2008

Tzedaka V'chesed

Little Fireflies Illuminate the World Autistic Kids Build Self-Confidence through Martial Arts

By Fern Sidman

Special needs children come in all shapes and sizes, from all backgrounds and ethnicities; indeed, Alaska governor and Republican vice presidential nominee Sarah Palin gave birth to a baby with Down Syndrome just months ago. For decades now, Jewish communities around the world have addressed this paramount issue with a great measure of determination, laboring assiduously to create organizations that provide an optimal level of care for these special souls. Yet, for some severely autistic children, it would appear that even the most experienced educators and institutions have failed in their attempts to reach them, leading many to believe that the autistic child lives in his own isolated, lonely, and uncommunicative world.

Enter Lisa Chin, a bright, charming, 36-year-old tae kwon do instructor with a 1st degree black belt. Two years ago, Ms. Chin developed a highly original martial arts program which has produced stellar results for her autistic clients. "The name of my program is FirefliesNY," says Ms. Chin, "because despite the impression that most

people have of children with autism, I truly believe if we can reach these special souls with love, they can actually illuminate the world, just like little fireflies at night that brighten up the dense darkness."

Relocating from her native Chicago fourteen years ago, Chin arrived in the New York City area with impressive credentials. She earned an MS degree in special education and certification as an ABA (applied behavior analysis) therapist. During her six plus years as special education teacher at Brooklyn's M.S. 443, Ms. Chin acquired a deep affinity for children with autism. It was then that she decided on her life's mission: to synthesize a background in martial arts with her special education training and create a program specifically designed to bring out the best in autistic kids.

"It was while I was a special education teacher in Brooklyn that I realized I have a magical connection of sorts with children with autism. I knew in my heart that they could make even greater progress with simple life skills if only

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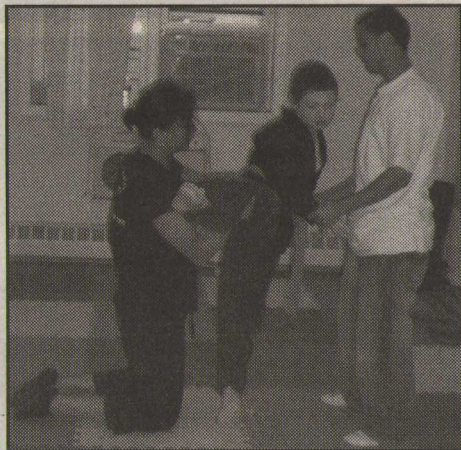
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we could find a way to enhance their confidence and self-esteem," Chin excitedly explains. Fully aware that each child's abilities and needs are distinct, she works in conjunction with each child's occupational and physical therapists, parents and teachers to design a personalized program of growth and productivity for each child. "Although my program welcomes all children from all walks of life, as it turns out, the vast majority of my students are Jewish children, and many of them are Orthodox Jews, so I also consult with rabbis and religious community leaders," Chin adds.

Reflecting on how it all began, she says, "Through word of mouth, parents of kids with autism heard about my mind-body connection program and asked me to come to their homes and work with their kids." It turns out that martial arts, with an emphasis on Korean tae kwon do, worked wonders with her clients. With tears in her eyes, Chin recalls, "For the first time in their young lives, some of my students have said their first word or waved their hands...after attending my classes." FirefliesNY grew exponentially, and Chin was forced to move from a studio apartment to a duplex in the Windsor Terrace section of Brooklyn, where she now holds 45-minute sessions for

small groups limited to four students per class.

Chin's program incorporates tactile activities that promote gross and fine motor skill enhancement, along with exercises in stretching, breathing, balancing, kicking, punching, blocking, and jumping over moving objects. In addition to building self-esteem, she believes that the study of tae kwon do brings a sense of calm to her students,



physically and spiritually; helps to increase focus and reduce stress, anxiety, and aggression; and assists in minimizing the "meltdowns" that often impede the progress of autistic children. "What is really important," she says, is that "a child with autism who studies martial arts can build strong bridges between their mind and body and between their inside self and the world outside."

Steven (Shmuel) Gershbein is a noted Brooklyn attorney and activist for the special needs community. He is also the primary caregiver for his son, a severely autistic pupil in Chin's program. "For the past nine years," says Gershbein, "I have taken [my son] to scores of physical and occupational therapists; and nobody, but nobody, has been able to reach him. Lisa Chin is the only professional that he listens to." He gushes with appreciation, "I am exceptionally gratified by the results that Ms. Chin has produced with my son... [and]...as a parent, I shep loads of nachas watching my son do drop kicks and karate chops. His confidence and self-esteem is at an all-time high, and I can't thank Hashem enough for bringing Ms. Chin into my son's life."

Added to the challenges of raising a child who requires intense care, Gershbein has had to suffer the crippling bureaucratic inertia of agencies that serve special needs clients and the mentally ill. His voice full of resignation, he described his employment at a state agency whose purpose was to protect the civil rights of special needs patients and the mentally ill, but was, in reality, "top heavy with burned-out politicians and not gutsy litigators." Bitterly, he tells me that although his son resides in an institution operated under the auspices of the Jewish Board of Family and Children's Services, it is,

in his opinion, an organization where "the vast majority of administrators are neither pro-Jewish nor pro-family." The numerous flaws in this broken system can only be corrected, declares Gershbein, "with the blessings of the Almighty and the type of creativity, warmth, and love that Lisa Chin brings to the negotiating table - or to the dojo, as it were."

Chin has received calls from parents and educators in almost every major city in the U.S., asking her to set up Fireflies programs in their areas. "Right now, we're being deluged with requests to come out to Seattle, Chicago, and Los Angeles," she says. "And while I would love to expand my program, finding the right people to train is a challenge." The optimistic Chin actually has several wonderful volunteers to assist her with classes, and she hopes to attract even more energetic and dedicated helpers. After witnessing the miraculous work this dynamic young woman does with those who require the most patience and compassion, I have no doubt that her dream of expanding Fireflies will become a reality.

Those wishing to contact Lisa Chin may do so by phone, at 718-355-9480, or via e-mail, at lisa@firefliesny.com. For more information and to help with an autistic child's tuition, log on to her website, www.firefliesny.com.