

Special-needs students learn the joys of judo

BY KATHLEEN McGRORY

kmcgrory@MiamiHerald.com

For years, Santiago Chavez watched his big brothers practice jujitsu, wishing he could participate.

But for a boy who once used a wheelchair and now needs crutches to walk, martial arts lessons were out of the question.

Until now.

Santiago is one of 26 special-needs children at Tropical Elementary in West Miami-Dade who are learning the Japanese art of judo. Their teachers are champion martial artists.

Santiago, who has cerebral palsy, doesn't use the crutches during judo. He stands up on his own and walks.

“This is the first time my son is able to do anything like this,” Yeri Reynosa said. “He's so excited. It helps with his confidence, with his balance. He just loves it.”

Said 10-year-old Santiago: “Judo is really fun.”

The idea for the classes first came about last year, after representatives from USA Judo visited Tropical Elementary, a public school near Westchester.

The organization, which oversees the U.S. Olympic team, was hoping to promote the sport among young children.

In particular, USA Judo wanted to connect with children who have limited or no sight. Judo is also a paralympic sport, practiced by visually-impaired athletes around the world.

“We know we need to start looking for Olympic and Paralympic talent early on,” said CEO Jose H. Rodriguez.

At Tropical, the athletes made a special stop in a classroom for visually-impaired children. The kids were captivated by the presentation -- and by Myles Porter, a Paralympian who is legally blind.

“Even after the presentation, they kept asking questions about judo,” principal Yubeda Miah said.

Luis Guardia, a retired Hall of Fame judoka who lives in Miami, was equally excited. He called Miah and asked to start an after-school program in judo for special-needs students.

“This would help to make them stronger, happier, healthier,” said Guardia, who is known as the

pioneer of Cuban judo. "It would give them confidence."

Miah was thrilled.

She was even more thrilled to learn that USA Judo, with a grant from the U.S. Olympic Committee, would fund everything from the equipment to the uniforms.

"It was a blessing," she said.

The lessons began this school year.

Every Tuesday and Friday afternoon, the school cafeteria is transformed into a dojo.

Tables and chairs are replaced by gray and red *tatami*, the Japanese word for floor mats. Shoes are not allowed.

Two dozen students file in, each one wearing a *gi*, the traditional white uniform worn for practice and competition.

The children are pre-kindergartners through fifth-graders. There are boys and girls, with a range of special needs. Some are visually impaired. Others have physical or developmental disabilities.

But on the *tatami*, the children are equal. "Here, it's like they have no disability," Guardia said.

The lessons are slightly modified from traditional judo lessons. The children with visual impairments learn through touch and sound. The children with physical disabilities do modified moves. They help each other.

During a recent lesson, the kids greeted each other with a seated bow.

"*Hajime!*" the teacher shouted. "Begin!"

The kids paired off and practiced falling onto their backs.

"The first thing you learn in judo is how to fall," Guardia explained from the sidelines.

Next, the children practiced takedowns.

Andreina Induni, 5, smiled when she got to work with the *sensei*. She shook her head with excitement, her two long braids swinging side to side.

Andreina showed the teacher what she had learned. "Good job!" said *sensei* Roberto Alvarez, a third-degree black belt, offering the bright-eyed girl a high five.

At first, Andreina's mother had worried about enrolling her in the program. "I thought it was too physical," Maria Induni said. "But now I see that she's learning so many things. She comes home every night and shows her father what she learned."

"I practice every day," Andreina confirmed, nodding her head emphatically.

Guardia hopes to one day extend the program to schools throughout the country. "It's a little ambitious," he said with humility.

For now, however, Guardia is focused on his students at Tropical Elementary.

Their classes will run through December -- and conclude with a special presentation for parents.

"We're teaching them discipline, respect, friendship, self-esteem -- skills that will serve them all their lives," Guardia said.

Already, the lessons have inspired fifth-grader Marino Flores. Marino, who is blind, has a newfound talent -- and new aspirations for his future.

"I think I could go to the Olympics," Marino said with an air of confidence. "I want to get the highest belt there is."

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