



## MESSAGE FROM THE PRESIDENT

**We've all read the headlines. Childhood obesity in the U.S. is epidemic. The number of young people who meet federal guidelines for healthy eating and regular exercise is plummeting.** The incidence of childhood diseases related to obesity—diseases like asthma, Type 2 diabetes, hypertension—is soaring. Those most affected by these dismal trends are black and Hispanic youngsters in low-income families.

The facts speak for themselves. But who speaks for the children? On this, as on so many issues, we at the Harlem Children's Zone have found that it is best to let young people speak for themselves.

Five years ago, the young people in our community responded to the epidemic of childhood and adolescent obesity and poor nutrition by helping to establish the TRUCE Fitness and Nutrition Center. It was, literally, a survival strategy. Studies show that the probability of adolescent obesity persisting into adulthood is as high as 80 percent. And overweight adults are at greatly increased risk for life-threatening diseases like cancer and stroke.

Working with HCZ staff, our young people designed a rigorous, challenging program. It examines nutrition in-depth and explores the ill effects of unhealthy behaviors. It gives young participants a forum to speak out in their own voice. Like most HCZ programs, it has an academic enrichment component. And it all takes place in a facility that provides the opportunity for fitness and training to the entire community.

But young people are ambitious. It wasn't enough for them to pose, and answer, the question: How can we become more fit? They posed for themselves the larger question: Fit for what? Their answers to that question are embodied in the very structure of the program they helped to design, a structure that places personal fitness in the wider context of family and community. It's a structure that makes young people fit to lead; to model healthy behavior; to become strong, caring, productive adults; and to make a positive contribution to society.

The TRUCE Fitness and Nutrition Center uses an ongoing series of tests and surveys to measure its success in meeting its goals. But of course the real measure of success is in the lives of those who participate in the program. In this issue of *A Look Inside*, you'll meet some of those participants and hear what they have to say about how the program has affected their lives. When you do, we think you'll agree with us that this is a terrific program.

GEOFFREY CANADA  
President/CEO



# TRUCE Fitness and Nutrition Center

**It is the beginning of the new semester, and the first meeting of the TRUCE Fitness and Nutrition Center Young Men's Group is about to begin. Twelve members of the group sit on chairs loosely arranged in a circle, laughing and joking as TRNC Team Coordinator Roberto Gomez, starts the conversation.**

**"What's on your mind?" Gomez asks. "Basketball," they answer in chorus. And suddenly all the youngsters are talking at once about the game. Gomez tries to get them to talk one at a time, but, exuberant and boisterous, they are soon shouting and jumping up and down in their seats.**

In a deep but quiet voice, Gomez asks, "What does it take to be a great basketball player?" "Practice," says one young man. "Great moves," says another.

"Discipline," says Gomez. "To succeed in basketball, to succeed in anything, first takes discipline."

Now that he has the full attention of the group, Gomez continues. "What you do on the court reflects who you are off the court. I hear some of you say you want to be in the NBA. It's great to have big dreams, but to achieve those dreams requires focus and effort and discipline. This time of your life is critical. Blink your eyes and you'll be in high school, and then it's already late to start creating the future you want. Now is the time. Now is when you want to set your goals and establish the habits that make you reach those goals. Right now is the most important time of your life."

At HCZ's TRUCE Fitness and Nutrition Center, *right now* is the years between ages 10 and 14. TFNC targets young people in that developmentally crucial period, pre-adolescence and early adolescence, and works with them to enhance their aware-



ness of fitness and health, improve their academic performance, and empower them to make healthier decisions.

The program began in 2000, conceived by youths in the community as a response to growing evidence of poor nutrition and rising rates of obesity among American children, especially black and Hispanic children.

Poor nutrition is associated with increased risk for many diseases, including the three leading causes of death: heart disease, cancer, and stroke. Many studies have indicated that poor nutrition can also have a negative effect on cognitive ability. According to a 2006 report by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention,

most young people are not following the recommendations set forth in the Dietary Guidelines for Americans. Of U.S. youths ages 6-19, 67% exceed dietary guidelines recommendations for fat intake, 72% exceed recommendations for saturated fat intake. At the same time, only 35.8% of those youths met currently recommended levels of physical activity. Not surprisingly, the number of overweight children ages 6-11 the U.S. has doubled over the past 20 years, and the number of overweight adolescents, ages 12-19, has more than tripled.

### Training to Become Leaders

The message in these trends is clear: Good nutrition and physical fitness are critical to the overall quality of life, and to improve their quality of life now and in the future, young people must improve the quality of their nutrition and fitness. The question is, how do you get that message out to the young people who need it most?

“That’s easy to answer,” says Monalisa Tolbert, TFNC director. “The best way to reach young people is through other young people. Our peers have an effect on all of us throughout our lives, but young people, especially young people in the middle-school age group, are deeply susceptible to peer influence. At Truce Fitness and Nutrition Center, we turn that into an advantage. TFNC participants are not thought of, treated like, or called recipients of services. Here, they are in training to become leaders, to become examples of and advocates for good health—physical, intellectual, and social—for themselves, their families, their peers, and their community.

“For starters, they lead the work in this program. TFNC is a youth-led program. We call all of our par-

ticipants youth managers. The youth managers are divided into teams, depending on their grade level. Fifth-graders are junior youth managers, or JYMs; sixth graders are alphas; seventh graders are omegas; and eighth graders are health ambassadors. As they move from one grade to another, they increase not only their capabilities but also their responsibilities. And they have a lot of responsibilities at every level. Every person on this staff puts everything they’ve got into this program. We expect a lot of our youth managers in return.”

TFNC operates as an after-school program year-round, including weekends and summers. The center is located on the fifth floor of the TRUCE building on 118th Street and St. Nicholas Avenue. Literally the first step to (and test of) fitness for both staff and youth managers alike is to climb the five steep flights of stairs to the building’s top floor. Like every other aspect of TFNC, it’s not easy—and it’s well worth the effort.

The center is a series of brightly colored, well-lit rooms, most of which serve multiple purposes during the week, and sometimes during a single day. Besides the administrative office there’s the mirrored fitness room, which houses treadmills, free weights, and other exercise equipment and instructional materials; the Insight Center, whose work spaces, desks, and computers are used for the various academic enrichment activities offered by the program; the team room, which converts from lecture hall to discussion site to performance center with a quick rearrangement of chairs and tables; and the dojo, where both martial arts and yoga classes take place.

The center is open until 7:00 p.m. every week night. Youth managers arrive there directly after school and sign in at the front desk, just inside the entrance to the floor. They’re greeted by a staff member who welcomes them and checks to see that they’re not bringing unhealthy foods into the center. Soda, chips, fried food and the like must be left on the “no-no” table near the entrance. Healthy snacks, like juice and vegetable or fruit trays, are served every day.

“Junk food messes up your body,” says fifth-grader Joshua Armstrong. Though only in his first year at TFNC, Joshua has learned quickly, and first-hand, about the importance of good nutrition.

“I heard about TRUCE Fitness from a friend,” says Joshua. “He told me it was really fun. When I came to check it out, I saw the fitness room, with all the equipment, and I asked to join, because I wanted to be strong. Right away, they were telling us about healthy food, fresh food. But I really like soda and chips. I thought maybe if I worked out, it wouldn’t matter what I ate. Only if you have soda and chips, or any junk food, before or after you work out, your stomach will feel really funny. And your workout won’t be too good. So I don’t ever eat junk food now.”

Joshua understands the importance of fitness and nutrition in a highly personal way. That is in keeping with TFNC’s tiered learning structure, which groups participants into teams, based on their school grade. The core material is common to all: In addition to their academic pursuits, youth managers train for physical fitness, examine healthy and

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unhealthy behaviors, and learn about nutritional values and choices. But each year, progressively, teams study and practice fitness and nutrition with a deeper understanding and in a wider context. Fifth-graders, or JYMs, like Joshua are asked to undertake their learning and responsibilities from a personal point of view; alphas incorporate a family view; omegas take a community view; and health ambassadors actively promote the teachings and values of TFNC through peer leadership and a broad range of community service activities.

### Motivating Students to Do and Be Their Best

Members of each team are encouraged to act as models for members of the younger teams. And staff members are models for all youth managers. In that way, strong leadership skills are cultivated. And, according to Director Tolbert, strong bonds are formed as well—among TFNC youth managers, between youth managers and staff, and between all participants and the program itself.

“Several TFNC staff people come out of HCZ programs, including me,” says Tolbert. “I grew up in this agency. I started out taking karate classes from [HCZ President and CEO] Geoffrey Canada, when I was in high school. Later I worked at HCZ’s Booker T. Washington Beacon as a child care worker. Geoff recommended I get into the Peacemaker program, which I did. And then I worked in various positions in other HCZ programs. All the while, I was in school, struggling. It took me a long time to finish school. But Geoff stuck by me. And he pushed me. He’d keep saying, ‘If you drop out of school, you can’t work here any more.’ It was hard, going to school and working part time. But I’m so grateful that Geoff and other HCZ staff members mentored and motivated me. And that’s what I, what all staff members, want to do for the young people in TFNC. We want to motivate them to stay in school and to stay with HCZ programs. We want the kids we work with to graduate college and become caring, healthy, productive adults. We want that for every kid who comes through TFNC.”

Sixth-grader Taquan Banks is one of the youth managers who has become highly motivated through his participation in TFNC. He says he joined the program because he didn’t have anything to do after school or during the summer. “I was bored,” Taquan says, “and my cousin, who was in the program, told me there were lots of things to do there.”

Taquan immediately got involved

in the full range of TRNC activities, including weight and aerobic training and academic enrichment. He is struck by the progress he has made in such a short period of time. “I joined in fifth grade,” says Taquan. “I never worked out before that. Now I can do 20 push-ups without stopping. I can run fast for 20 minutes. My cholesterol was over 200 when I started the program; now it’s 120. I knew that I needed help with school, because my grades weren’t so good, and I had trouble with my homework. This year, I started out in September with math and reading scores of 70. When I was tested in January, I got 80 in reading and 85 in math.”

Taquan attributes these improvements to the work habits he’s learned at TFNC. “The teachers here say, ‘Good habits give good results.’ At first I didn’t understand what they meant. But they would measure us all the time: How many crunches can you do? How many reps with how much weight? I could see when I worked out every day that I was getting better. And it was the same with school work. At the Insight Center, they said, ‘Study every day, read every night.’ And when I started doing that, my grades got better and I liked school better. This year at TRUCE Fitness they tell us to think about how the things we’re learning affect our families. Every day when I come home my mother asks, ‘What did you do at TRUCE Fitness?’ We talk about nutrition, about fitness. Now when she cooks vegetables and soups, I like to eat them. I eat lots of fruits too. We never eat at McDonald’s any more.”

For Taquan, the steady progress he is making at TFNC, and the opportunity to participate in other HCZ programs in the future, give him confidence that he may be able to achieve a long-term goal. “I want to be a singer and dancer,” Taquan says. “I used to hope that would just happen, but I didn’t know how. But now I see it’s like everything. You’ve got to work at it day by day. Now I practice singing and dancing the way I practice fitness training. When I graduate from eighth grade and out of TFNC, I’m going to go right to the TRUCE program downstairs, where they teach arts and performance to high school kids. The teachers here say that I can do whatever I want if I’m willing to work for it. They say, ‘Go for it. We’re with you all the way.’ ”

### Measuring Success

That’s what TFNC provides for all its youth managers: measured progress in a supportive environment. The program offers a full range of activities year round in its key areas of interest. To help students gain an in-depth understanding of those key areas, the school year is divided into three ten-week phases with specific goals. In Phase 1, Health Promotion, which begins in September, students examine the concept of a drug-free body, learn how to resist marketing strategies that may lead them to make poor health choices, and identify and assess risk factors and environmental influences. During Phase 2, Fitness, they gain increased flexibility, muscle strength, and stamina; reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease; and build self-confidence.

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work. At home, I used to get distracted easily. But I learned to concentrate better at the Insight Center. The teachers there, and the student advocates, encouraged me to think ahead about what I want to be and how I was going to become what I want to be. I'm not sure what I want to be yet, but at TFNC I've met lots of different people who made me think hard. We have doctors come and talk to us, college professors, people from investment companies. Last month the actress Elizabeth Berkley met with our Young Women's Group. She told us, 'You're meant to shine your own special light in the world. Push yourself, learn now to be the brightest light you can be.' Now I'm pushing myself to get good grades so that I can go to college. No matter what I finally decide I want to do, I know I'll need a college degree to do it."

TFNC offers a wide range of activities that give youth managers different ways of understanding and promoting fitness and nutrition and encourage them to establish and work toward ambitious career goals. Many of those activities are also fun.

Every week begins with Motivational Mondays, when students come together to talk about what's on their minds. Sometimes teams report on their weekly activities. Individuals or small groups may put their thoughts into song or write and perform skits. Any topic is welcome, but mostly youth managers discuss fitness and nutrition as it relates to themselves personally, their family, and their community. Besides giving young people a forum in which to express themselves, Motivational Mondays help participants overcome their fear of speaking in public and help them to develop a confident public presence.

Tasteful Tuesdays require another kind of courage: willingness to try new and unfamiliar foods. Staff members go to organic food stores and bring back hummus, baba ganoush, carrot juice, and the like for students to sample. Although there is often resistance at the beginning of each year, youth managers soon come to regard Tasteful Tuesdays as an adventure. And the wholesome foods they test warily sometimes become favorite snacks.

On Fun Fridays, students let loose after a long week. They're encouraged to relax, kick back, and have a good time. Friday nights are family nights. All youth managers are required to participate in organized fitness activities 2.5 hours each week. Parents are encouraged to join their children in the fitness room, for yoga class, and during martial arts instruction. And in fact, the fitness classes and facilities are open to all members of the community. On Fridays, informal competitions are often staged, parent-to-parent,

In Phase 3, Nutrition, students gain an understanding of the U.S. Department of Agriculture Food Pyramid; learn to manage food choices; and record and review daily food intake in order to make appropriate diet modifications when necessary.

At the beginning and end of each phase, youth managers are tested at their team, or grade, level through written exams and physical performance ratings, including measurement of weight and body mass index. Progress is also assessed through surveys administered at the beginning and end of the school year.

The results are impressive. In the most recent rounds of testing, 87% of youth managers at all levels increased their knowledge of material covered during Phase 1, Health Promotion, and every single youth manager tested higher at the end than at the beginning of Phase 2, Fitness. The overall average rate of improvement in Phase 2 was a whopping 25 percent. This year, eight in ten youth managers successfully completed the President's Challenge, a national fitness program. In addition, survey results for 2006 indicate that most TFNC students are already preparing themselves for college; the majority believe that they will begin college directly after graduating high school.

Celeena Lee, a seventh-grade omega student, is a good example. She joined TFNC in the sixth grade, mostly, she says, because she wanted to become healthier and more fit. "I've always loved dance," says Celeena. "I like physical activity, and I wanted to learn more about how to stay in shape. I did learn more about that. They taught us all about healthy and unhealthy food, about trans fats. The fitness trainer taught us about all the muscle groups, about how to work out to get the most out of it, but not hurt yourself. But I also learned a lot of other things. At the Insight Center, I started to really focus on my school

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child-to-child, parent-with-child. Families also play games, watch movies, and dance together.

Saturdays, the center is open from 10:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m., and during much of that time, youth managers are studying and competing at chess. The practice pays off. Each year for the last three years, the TFNC team has come home with first- or second-place trophies in national competitions.

### Giving Back to the Community

TFNC manages to do an enormous amount of work with a very small staff. Every year, about 250 youth managers participate in the program, just over 100 of them during the school year and about 150 more during the summer. Serving all those youngsters are four full-time staff members, including the director and assistant director, a data specialist, and the martial arts instructor, as well as 19 part-time staff, consisting of two AmeriCorps workers, called Peacemakers, 12 team coordinators, two tutors, a custodian, and five student advocates.

Most staff members play many roles. Student advocates, for example, meet frequently with each student in their charge, talk over schoolwork and other issues, and review test scores and report cards. They also meet regularly with each student's guidance counselors, teachers, tutors, and parents to get a fuller picture of what's going on behind the report card, so they can anticipate and address issues that may hinder a student's development or achievement.

Team coordinators work with youth managers in their groups, lead activities and discussions, teach students about fitness and nutrition, conduct research into topics under study, and help plan the curriculum. It's difficult and demanding work. "But I wouldn't trade it for anything else in the world right now," says Roberto Gomez, sixth-grade team coordinator. Gomez sees his work more as a mission than a job.

"For me, this is payback," says Gomez. "I made a lot of mistakes when I was a kid. I blew some real

opportunities, mostly out of misplaced anger. But when I was 16 years old, HCZ gave me a chance to work with young kids, in second through fourth grade. That job turned me around. Because of HCZ's values, I realized I couldn't preach to children that they should do their homework when I wasn't doing mine. I began to buckle down and really work in school. My grandmother always used to say, 'We're all one. We all have different backgrounds, different ages, different points of view, but we're all one people.' That's what I love about HCZ, that the whole organization embraces and embodies that same philosophy: We're all one. And that's how I work with the kids at TFNC. I try to live my life so that I can be someone they can look up to, like a big brother. I go to Monroe College and I work really, really hard in school. I want the kids at TFNC to be able to say, 'Look at Rob. He's in college, and he's just like me. He may have made some mistakes, but he learned from his mistakes. If he can do it, I can do it.'"

For many youth managers, the greatest motivation to succeed is that they will then, like Gomez, become a model to others. From the time they enter the program, participants are trained to think of themselves as leaders—at home and in the community, and especially for those younger than themselves. From fifth grade onwards, students prepare their minds and bodies to become stronger, healthier, more disciplined and fit. By the time they reach the eighth grade, they are ready and able to put what they have learned in the service of others. They have become health ambassadors. As community leaders, they may serve on youth organizations like the Teen Advisory Board or the Gang Violence Task Force; stage, and budget, community events, such as talent shows; or represent TFNC at external venues.

"It's a big responsibility," says eighth-grader Jaiah Demby. "I'll be honest. I like to play around and have a good time. But since I joined TFNC, I wanted to become a health ambassador, and that meant I had to make some changes. I have trouble controlling

my anger. I get mad very quickly, especially when people ignore me. No one is perfect; everyone makes mistakes, has something that needs fixing. You learn from your mistakes, learn from others, and you get better. At TFNC they taught me ways to help control my anger, like count to ten or think of something else. I've got it under control now. So I can be a good example to the younger kids. I'm an ambassador, I have to be mindful of what I do. I learned from the teachers at TFNC, and the little kids learn from me. We all need help. I learned that here. And now I'm able to help others."

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pation in The Growing Connection, a grassroots project developed jointly by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations and the American Horticultural Society. Through the project, participants in school gardening programs and community gardens in the U.S., Ghana, Mexico, and Nicaragua grow food, conduct horticultural experiments, and share their lessons with one another through the Internet.

Jaiah Demby was one of the health ambassadors who participated in the project. "It was the first time I ever gardened," says Jaiah. "TRUCE Fitness has a garden right next to our building. We grow things there, and we donate the vegetables to community organizations. But I never worked in that garden. This last summer, in Growing Connections, we grew everything up on the roof. We planted corn, eggplant, cabbage, peppers, kale, basil, and tomatoes. We grew everything in these big boxes, specially made for growing vegetables in cities or small spaces. I watered the plants every day. I never thought I'd be interested in gardening, but it was awesome to stand on a roof in Harlem and see nothing but vegetables all around you."

Three health ambassadors, including Jaiah, represented TFNC at the United Nations Growing Connections celebration last October. Kofi Annan, then the UN secretary-general, spoke at the event, which was attended by dignitaries from around the world. "It was a privilege to be part of that," says Jaiah, "to see how everyone shares this one thing, the need for healthy food. I could see how I, how TFNC and my community, are connected to the whole world."

TFNC encourages youth managers to look at the big picture. Students at all grade levels are asked to think about what they want to become when they are adults: what careers they might want to pursue, what contribution they think they will make to the world. They are also encouraged to be practical in thinking of how they will support themselves as adults, pay for their college education, perhaps eventually raise a family.

Financial responsibility and rewards are important at TFNC. All youth managers receive a stipend every two weeks for fulfilling their responsibilities in the program. Small bonuses are given for extra effort or special achievements, and deductions are sometimes taken when students do not follow the rules or complete their tasks.

Financial literacy is important as well. In their final year in the program, health ambassadors are invited to participate in the Investment Camp, a project sponsored by Lehman Brothers investment firm. Every week, about a dozen camp participants meet with volunteers from the firm to study stock trading and personal finance. It's not a class for the faint-hearted. Students are drilled in stock evaluation tech-

## Reaching Out to Other Organizations

TFNC itself reaches out to other organizations for help in operating specific projects. For example, the program collaborates with the Academy for Educational Development in Washington, D.C., on community mapping projects. In one of these, youth managers identified health facilities, pharmacies, and medical centers in the community; described the services provided by those organizations to community residents; and developed a database and a video documenting the results. Last August, the TFNC health literacy mapping team was invited to the Institute of Medicine in Washington to present its findings, as well as its personal experience and observations, on a project that examined how food and beverage marketing practices affect community residents' health choices.

The TFNC program has also developed long-term partnerships with outside organizations. Doctors from Harlem Hospital, for instance, visit the center regularly to talk with youth managers and community residents about health issues, including career opportunities in the healthcare industry. Several national and local organizations, including the American Red Cross and the Fidelis Care health insurance company, participate in the annual TFNC-sponsored Health Fair, which drew more than 400 community residents last year. And the Cornell University Cooperative Extension provides a host of services through the center, from classes in healthy food choices to demonstrations of safe food preparation.

Last summer, Cornell facilitated TFNC's partici-

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niques and required to present in-depth analyses of stock performance in class. Standing before their peers and the Lehman Brothers instructors, they are peppered with questions during their presentations. What does the company do? What sector is it in and who is the competition? What is the historic revenue trend? What are projected revenues? Historical earnings per share?

Health ambassador Dajanee Fabian, a member of the Investment Camp, holds up very well under the pressure. “It’s difficult,” she says, “but I know it’s really good for me.” Dajanee joined TFNC only last summer, but she quickly committed to the program’s principles of discipline, learning, and service. And she takes her responsibilities as an advocate and role model very seriously.

“It’s hard to get up in front of your friends, and in front of adult experts, and present information and make judgments and state your opinion,” she says. “What’s good about it is that it makes you prepare

and research really well. Stocks aren’t something you can pretend you know something about. It makes you think through the reasons you make the choices you make, picking one stock and trying to predict how it will do. If you’ve prepared well, it’s exciting to answer the questions. And I know it’s good practice for the future. That’s what college is going to be like, and later on, work. What I do and say will be questioned, and I’ll have to have good answers. One thing I’ve learned, when the answer is wrong, it’s another opportunity to learn. I don’t get frustrated or embarrassed about being wrong now.

“I really love to learn. I’ve always gotten good grades in school. But since I’ve been at TFNC I’ve been challenged to think about why we learn too. As a health ambassador, I’m learning about fitness and nutrition. But it’s not just so that I eat healthy and keep fit. I want to use what I’m learning to help others. My little sister is seven years old, and she’s always fighting at home. I got her into the karate class at TRUCE Fitness and it’s been really good for her; it’s calmed her down. That’s a small example, but it’s what happens here. They ask a lot of you, and you do it, and it really feels great to meet the challenge. And then you want to pass that on to others. You want to do something good with that good feeling.”

## Meeting the Challenge

TFNC challenges all participants—staff, youth managers, parents, and community members—in many ways. And if competition is any measure, they meet those challenges consistently and superbly well. Here are a few examples. Three times in the past four years, the TFNC 4H Club has taken top place in the annual 4H Public Speaking Event, sponsored by Cornell University’s Cooperative Extension Program. In 2006, TFNC won 12 first-place medals at the HCZ Summer Games. One TFNC program has won so many trophies for so many participants, the awards are literally countless. That is the martial arts class, led by Sensei Abdul Aziz.

Sensei Aziz has been teaching at TFNC since the program began. His teaching style—passionate, precise, perfectionist—reflects 42 years of intense dedication to the field of martial arts, which Aziz began studying at the age of eight, under the tutelage of his brother.

“I was from the beginning obsessed with the martial arts,” says Aziz. “I would practice four to five times a day, in parks, projects hallways, on roofs, anywhere I could find that was quiet and deserted. My early training was not for competition, it was for survival in the South Bronx, where I lived. And in fact, martial arts did save my life. There was a period in my teens when the streets really had me, and my martial arts teacher at the time, Master Bilal, was there for me and helped me to get on the straight path.

“But eventually I did begin competing, in the 1970s. I have won hundreds, probably thousands, of tournaments. I don’t keep track any more. And I am still competing, and winning, on the national level. But





at this point in my life the most important thing to me is saving children by training and teaching karate. I have over 300 students at TRUCE Fitness and Nutrition Center. I know I have a gift, I have a lot to teach. But I also have a lot to learn. My technique must always improve both mentally and physically. If the instructor improves, then the student improves. The skill of an able teacher lies not necessarily in the transfer of information, but rather in awakening the mind of the learner. My dream is to inspire others, particularly young people, so that we may all work not just to better ourselves, but also to better the world. Remember,

karate is not only karate, it is life.”

For Sensei Aziz, students and teachers alike get the most out of life, and out of the martial arts, only when they put their best into it. And everyone’s best can be achieved only through discipline, focus, effort. That is what he demands of himself and his students in every class, and that is what he gets.

Before entering the TFNC dojo, students remove their outer clothing, such as coats and hats, and take off their shoes. Standing in their gi, or training clothes, at the threshold, they bow and say, “Onegaishimasu,” which means “please help me,” and receive a welcoming nod from Aziz in return. One entire wall of the dojo, and much of the floor space in front of it, is completely covered with trophies won by Sensei and his students in martial arts tournaments. With its dark mats on the immaculate floor, and gleaming trophies catching the overhead lights, the dojo looks more like a shrine than a classroom. And that is how both students and Sensei view and treat it.

“Ebony, Emmanuel, are you part of this class?” Sensei asks as the lesson begins. The two youngest members of the martial arts class, both five years old, nod solemnly. “Then straighten your gi!”

At that sharp command, not only Ebony and Emmanuel, but all the students quickly check the belt that holds the jacket of their traditional martial arts uniform. Although the dojo is crowded with more than 30 karate students, there is no sound in the room except for the voice of Sensei and the soft thud of feet as the first six students demonstrate the katas,

or forms, of the basic exercises while the others watch, sitting erect on their mats.

## Creating a Positive Effect

The martial arts class is the most popular activity at TFNC. Like other fitness activities, martial arts is open to all community members, and a large number of adults, especially TFNC parents, take the classes. Now, as this group watches the demonstration, they look concerned. They can tell that Sensei Aziz is displeased.

“Your pose is correct,” Aziz says to one student, “but something is missing. What?”

Tyreek Emanuel knows the answer. “Positive effect,” he says. Twelve-year-old Tyreek has been studying martial arts with Sensei Aziz for five years. He is a serious and talented student. He’s also a martial arts promoter. Four years ago, he brought his mother, Taheerah Emanuel, to the dojo to watch a class, and they’ve been studying together with Aziz ever since.

“I could see the difference martial arts made for Tyreek right away,” says Taheerah. “He became much more disciplined. He always had a lot of energy, but it was scattered. He’s very capable, good at lots of things. But he always seemed to be in many places at once, not wholly present in what he was doing.”

“Then I learned positive effect,” says Tyreek. “It means whatever you do, you put your all into it, your mind and your heart, everything, one hundred percent. Sensei says we have to do everything with positive effect, not just in class, but in every part of our life.”

“At first you think that positive effect is the effect on your work in class,” says Taheerah. “But then I realized, no, the positive effect is on you. You become stronger, more disciplined, more focused. You would think putting maximum effort into everything would make you more tired, but it’s the opposite: It makes you more alive and energized. I used to huff an puff coming up these five flights of stairs to TRUCE Fitness; now I fly up the stairs. I’ve never been as happy as I’ve been since taking class with Sensei. And I’ve never seen Tyreek as happy. We talk about it at home a lot, how this gives me strength at work, gives him confidence and concentration at school. This has been a great gift and a great blessing for both of us.”

Tyreek comes to martial arts class from school, nearby. Taheerah fits in martial arts around her demanding work schedule. She can’t always make it to class at the very beginning. But mother and son are together at the end of class. That’s when all the students stand and recite the student creed. Sensei composed it for his martial arts students, but it has become the unofficial pledge of TFNC.

“Every day in every way, I am getting better and better. If you can’t, you must. If you must, you will. I’m better than yesterday, but not as good as tomorrow. We are motivated. We are dedicated. We are on a quest to be our best. Winners never quit. Quitters never win. I choose to be a winner.”

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