

Boxing, martial arts gym teaches life lessons

Owner also trains athletes, Godsmack lead singer

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JULIE HUSS/Staff photoAt left, Sue Centner, executive director of Community Alliance for Teen Safety, stands with Julio Pena, owner of Thrive gym in Londonderry. Pena has coached boxing and martial arts for many years and was honored by the New Hampshire Governor's Council on Physical Activity and Health for his commitment and support of fitness and community efforts. Pena's gym also reaches out to young people not only to support good health and fitness but to help make a difference in young lives that may be leading in the wrong directions. Centner said Pena's work should be honored.



LONDONDERRY — A local fitness coach not only trains those wanting to gain physical strength, but also helps students find success on all life's paths.

Julio Pena, of Thrive Boxing and Martial Arts Center on Hillside Avenue, was recently awarded a New Hampshire Governor's Council on Physical Activity and Health outstanding achievement honor for his efforts training local youth and other students in not only boxing and martial arts but also in making sound, successful decisions in life.

By putting students in the boxing ring, or on the martial arts mat, it's not just training the specifics for successful matches, but also creating an environment where students can find support and hope while struggling with life issues.

Sue Centner, executive director of Community Alliance for Teen Safety, or CATS, said Pena's efforts should be honored and are a success story for those who may be trying to steer away from dangerous behaviors or risky decisions.

"I came here for the first time and was overwhelmed," Centner said. "It has such a wonderful feeling."

The gym on Hillside Avenue is filled with portraits and framed photographs of Pena's students in action, along with one large display on an interior gym wall of an all-time hero, the late Muhammed Ali.

Pena said he recalls watching Ali fight on television and always hoped for a success story like the famed heavyweight champ.

"I wouldn't be in business if it weren't for Muhammed Ali," he said.

Pena said one of his first loves was baseball, while growing up in Venezuela. When he then began studying martial arts and boxing around the age of 10, he knew he had found another passion.

"I said, 'This is what I want to do with my life,'" Pena said.

Now Pena is widely known for coaching some of the sports' most acclaimed boxers and Olympians.

Singer and Godsmack lead man Sully Erna said training with Pena not only keeps him strong during grueling tour schedules, but it's also an outlet to support Pena's mission to help youth stay healthy and away from dangerous behaviors like alcohol or drug abuse.

Erna said he often tells his own story of growing in Lawrence, and not always making the best decisions, getting into fights or finding himself in other dangerous situations. He now works hard to bring positive messages to young people by sharing his own experiences.

"I wanted to be a musician, but felt stuck in the area with no way out," Erna recalled. "I fought my way out, I survived. You do your part in life. You do your little part."

Erna is no stranger to CATS. He has worked on youth efforts along with Centner in past years to help bring those positive messages to area youth.

"These are messages I need to pass on," Erna said. "Now it makes sense to me why I grew up in that place."

The people that come into the Thrive gym may not only learn about life success, but could possibly be a champion one day, Erna noted.

And students of all ages come through those doors.

"You never know when the stars will align," Erna said.

Centner said having Erna on board is a great way to boost support for area youth. "Every so often we connect, and he'll (call and say) I've got an idea," Centner said.

She said getting the word out about what Thrive does is not only for those wanting to learn to box, but also for those hoping to find a place to belong and learn other valuable life skills.

Pena thinks back to his young years growing up and said he wants to help kids today make better choices and have the best opportunities for health, strength and success.

"I see myself in them," he said. "I tell guys, if it weren't for boxing, I never would have made it. I prove it today, and I try to teach the kids."

It's not just teaching his craft to students. He wants this area to be a top spot for boxing and steering his athletes toward the competitive ring.

But it's also about what he teaches when it's about making life choices.

"We want to give the kids a chance to feel important," Pena said. "It's what you believe, you get to be a superstar for a day. I give respect to everyone that steps in the ring."

Erna said seeing the athletes train, along with his own training, is a new outlet, a new way to practice and grow.

"What's cool for me, it keeps me in shape, it's challenging, and I come in to help with the kids," Erna said. "To watch people get it, to see the improvement, it's about practice, practice. That becomes their addiction. Kids feel that lift, that change in their lives."

Thrive hosts an open house at the gym, 109 Hillside Avenue, on Saturday, June 18, from 3 to 5 p.m. There will be demonstrations and information on boxing and martial arts training and programs and an opportunity to see students spar in the ring.

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