The Motto “Specializing in Saving Lives” Means More to Youth Than One Might Expect

By William Yee  
March 3, 2020, 11:48 PM

“Wash your gee,” Rosario tells Nico, one of his students, as Nico prepares to leave the dojo. “Don’t come over here smelling like buttcheeks.”

Rosario treats his students like one might interact with annoying younger siblings, with constant banter, laughter, and teasing. As the students of Rosario’s Harlem Hives jiu-jitsu team roll around on blue mats, and the latest hip-hop tracks blast in the background, Pablo Rosario wears a boyish grin that just can’t seem to be erased.
Rosario was born and raised on 136th Street, right down the road from City College of New York. Each day, his single mother left the house at 6 in the morning and did not return until 7 or 8 at night. He was 10 when he started spending time with a group of high school juniors and seniors who loitered outside the local elementary school.

“A lot of these guys would just be hanging out, smoking, drinking. And they were all like, literally 16, 17,” Rosario says of his former friends. “They’ve been murdered, or drug abuse, or they’re incarcerated.”

Reflecting on his childhood, Rosario notes that if he hadn’t discovered Gregory Ford’s youth football program at Riverbank State Park, he might not be here today. “I feel so lucky that I found that program. I would’ve been another statistic and nobody would’ve batted an eye about it,” he says.

That football program started spontaneously. One day, while walking past Riverbank State Park with some of his friends, Rosario noticed a few boys playing two-hand touch football and decided to join in. “[Ford] said, ‘Hey, how would you like to start a team? And we were all like, ‘Sweet.’” Rosario lets out a hearty chuckle. “It was just one of those random things.”

Rosario said he went on to lead this after-school football team as the team captain and starting quarterback—a passion he continued in college as a walk-on athlete at Alfred State. While on the team, he found a much-needed father figure in Ford. As Rosario describes him, “He was like my dad.”

Now, Rosario wants to give back to the community that gave so much to him. But instead of coaching scrambles and pass rushes, he is teaching the grips and hooks of Brazilian jiu-jitsu to students between the ages of 8 and 17 at a makeshift dojo on 600 West 139th St.
Rosario is just one of many residents that cares about improving the quality and availability of youth programs in Harlem. After the loss of Tessa Majors, a Barnard first-year, city officials and community leaders called for significant steps to be taken to prevent a similar incident in the future. Local residents and city representatives pushed for—among a litany of ideas—increased funding for and access to community youth programs as a key solution to curbing future crime.

At a Morningside Heights safety meeting held in January to discuss the safety of Morningside Park in the wake of Majors’ passing, 26th Precinct NYPD Commanding Officer Aneudy Castillo said that 17 robberies were committed in Morningside Park last year, a 143 percent increase from 2018, and noted that a number of incidents could be attributed to youths.

For years, local activists have responded to the statistics by pointing to youth programming as a solution—not only to curb crime but to establish meaningful and vital opportunities to foster communities for kids in Harlem.

Two such community members—Kelvin McCallister and his Uptown Inner City League Baseball, and Pablo Rosario’s Harlem Hives—are examples of this. Both Harlemites noticed a dearth of support for community youth and resolved to address it.

McCallister, a long-time Columbia Facilities electrician, would pick up his son, Kelvin Jr., from school every day after work and take him to an empty, often unused baseball field in Manhattanville, where they played catch for hours on end. Over time, various kids from the community started to gravitate and
join their practices. McCallister welcomed them to join his game.

In 1990, McCallister decided to step up to the plate—literally. McCallister says the motto, “Specializing in Saving Lives,” pays homage to his motivation for creating his baseball league.

Fast forward to 2015, when Rosario started teaching kids as an uke, or assistant. Five months ago, he opened his own dojo in a small room. The exterior of his dojo is easy to miss without a second glance—it contains no signage or other form of advertising. It is sandwiched between a concrete wall and an H&R Block.

Each practice lasts about one hour. Rosario starts with 20 minutes of dynamic warm-ups, followed by 20 minutes of teaching techniques. The last 20 minutes are an opportunity for students to apply the techniques they learn through “situational rolling,” where they maneuver around certain positions.

*Listen to the dojo warm up.*

In both cases, the interest in founding a youth program arose out of observation and concern. Both McCallister and Rosario said they noticed a need for after-school programs and pledged to change that. The result of their efforts were safe, structured spaces for youth to discover new interests, stay physically active, and receive mentorship.

Prior to the creation of the baseball league, McCallister lived in the Manhattanville projects. As he describes it, “There was a serious epidemic of drugs and gangs and the crack epidemic. And there were just young people, both girls and boys, who were just left at the baseline on the streets and fending for
themselves.”

McCallister “noticed that programs kept getting cut. But they were all getting cut for kids whose parents can’t afford them.”

Rosario cites a similar pattern of youth programs getting cut. He remembered his personal experiences as a kid partaking in Ford’s youth football team and other after-school programs with the Beacon Center, located at I.S. 195 Roberto Clemente Middle School on West 133th. He often stayed late into the evenings playing basketball, doing homework, and learning yoga. The school—along with the programs housed in it—closed in 2013 due to poor academic performance, and its location now houses two other schools. With his Brazilian jiu-jitsu classes, Rosario hopes to foster a community for his youth akin to the ones he partook in as a child.

Various community residents told me they have seen a pattern that remains all too familiar. Tragedy strikes. A community mourns and vows reform. Gradually, that ephemeral fire is reduced to a barely flickering pile of ash. Desensitization seeps in. And life returns to business as usual.

According to city officials like Corey Ortega, the executive director of the New York City Council, funding these programs remains a formidable challenge. For him, the question is not if there will be cuts, but where they will be. Each increase in funding for an after-school youth program elicits a decrease in another program. Increasing resources for after-school programs requires readjusting the city budget to add a new expense line—which has to have long-term approval from a litany of rotating office-holders—rather than allocating a one-time amount of funding.

But this time, the community has seen reason for some more optimism. At the Morningside Heights safety meeting, Gale Brewer, the Manhattan borough president, argued that youth programs present the solution. “We want youth centers open more often, with longer hours, into the weekend. And we want to make sure whatever we have in terms of best practices for youth development, some of us have been saying that for a long time, is something that has meaningful, long-term impact,” she said.

In a separate interview with the Spectator, Weinberg noted that he’s been denied funding for youth programs by the city numerous times in the past, citing slow budgetary decisions and large changes. After January’s forum, however, he expressed hope that this time, the funding might come faster—the meeting finally gathered city officials, local residents, and representatives for a collective discussion—when previous conversations consisted of separate threads. At the same January community forum, District 7 Councilmember Mark Levine told residents that he planned to prioritize increased funding for youth development in the upcoming city budget negotiations, set to begin in March.

When he started the baseball league, McCallister initially had trouble finding funding. “We were a free program. At the time, we were asking for $7 for a T-shirt and a hat,” he says. But even this was difficult. “That was hard for parents to pay.”

He recalls visiting neighborhood stores and bodegas and asking for small contributions for the nascent program. “I used to go around asking, raising ‘em funds, so that we wouldn’t turn no kids away,” he explains.
Financing the jiu-jitsu youth program does not come easily either. On weekends, Rosario tells me that he works part-time shifts at both the Hogshead Tavern and Grill on the Hill, two local bars, to make rent. He also competes in local and national jiu-jitsu tournaments for cash prizes that range between $150 and $200.

“I don’t compete just for me. I also compete for the fact that I want the kids to know that what I’m teaching here works, that I’m not just somebody telling them what to do,” Rosario proudly mentions. “One thing I learned from Coach Greg was: Don’t ask someone to do something you’re not willing to do yourself.”

Regardless of funding, interest remains high. McCallister’s baseball league rapidly blossomed into an organization with over 375 youth participants and 15 volunteer coaches by 1994. But issues soon arose. The Manhattanville Tenant Association, in conjunction with the New York City Housing Authority, required McCallister to obtain a permit in order to lawfully use the baseball field. After failed negotiations with tenant associations, he lost access to the Manhattanville field and searched for another location.

Without the baseball league, McCallister began noticing changes. “What started to develop from that period was a lot of gangs, was a lot of drug-selling,” McCallister recounts. “There was this crack epidemic. The same kids who were playing baseball for six, seven years, they began to go out there and
started slinging drugs, and I started to see a rise in pregnancy.”

After reading an article in a local newspaper about the Department of Parks and Recreation, he applied for a permit to play at the Jacob H. Schiff Playground at West 138th Street and Amsterdam Avenue in 1998. Alongside offering permits for people like McCallister, the Department of Parks and Recreation also offers after-school programs for children ages six to 13, granting them academic support in areas like science, technology, engineering, and mathematics; arts and cultural programming; and special trips around the city.

“The Parks Department gave us a permit with no strings attached,” he recounts. The team has played at the playground every day since.

In 1998, McCallister changed the name to Uptown Inner City League and registered his organization as a 501(c) nonprofit organization. Today, there are teams that also play at Annunciation Playground on West 135th Street and Convent Avenue and Central Park. Others travel to areas all over the city, including the Bronx, Brooklyn, Williamsburg, and even Yankee Stadium.

McCallister and Rosario both fight tirelessly to ensure that their programs endure because of the positive impacts on the youth. For Rosario, his work is propelled by the positive impact it has on his students—one of which is Darvin, who turned eight years old last December. Darvin is the son of a single mother who works as a home health aide, sometimes not returning home until as late as eight in the evening—much like Rosario’s experience growing up in Harlem.

“At first, he came in and he was very just down, and always just kind of just upset about things, and kind of just lounging around,” Rosario recalls. Now, Darvin loves to kickbox, exercise, and train every day. And Rosario feels like Darvin’s mentor—just as Ford once was for Rosario himself.

*Listen to one student talk about how the jiu-jitsu program impacted him.*

Today, residents want city officials to fight for increased support for youth programs. But community leaders remain cautiously optimistic about the future and cognizant that the fight for the city’s youth is far from complete.

Indeed, Weinberg believes Columbia should increase its outreach efforts. As an example, he cites Columbia Community Impact, an organization that oversees over 10 youth programs, among other organizations, that serves more than 1,400 students. He also highlights the efforts of the Double Discovery Center, an organization which helps underprivileged community youth access and graduate from college, but he emphasizes that these programs could expand their impact if they also expanded their outreach to local institutions such as churches and schools.

Henry Danner, director of youth initiatives in the Office of Governmental Affairs at Columbia is part of a team that focuses on developmental programming for youth who have not yet graduated high school and are not employed. He agrees that more work needs to be done in regards to connecting the community with Columbia’s initiatives.
“I think something that can change in my strategy is to obviously connect with some people here [at the Morningside Heights safety meeting] that I haven’t connected with, and figure out ways to tie my program into what they’re doing, figure out ways to collaborate.”

To improve community youth development, Weinberg wants academic enrichment and other after-school youth programs to ensure that all young people receive the chance to participate. He cites as an example the Summer Youth Employment Program, which connects New York City students with opportunities for paid work experience in the summer. Of course, financing programs like this remains an evergreen issue.

The West Harlem Development Corporation, a company committed to enhancing the lives of West Harlem Residents, awards grants to over 60 nonprofit organizations, ranging from the Boys & Girls Club of Harlem and New York Road Runners to the Uptown Inner City League Baseball. Money for these grants comes from the Benefits Fund of the Community Benefits Agreement signed by University President Lee Bollinger as a commitment to the community 2009—but the University will provide its last deposit in 2024, which raises serious questions about the future of these organizations.

Majors’ case was one that called for action, but the question remains: Will the calls be answered?

At the Morningside Heights safety meeting, in the Police Athletic League, a local youth center on the corner of 119th Street, the energy of community residents vociferously calling for change oozes throughout the cafeteria. A student uses a jumbo Sharpie to dream up a list of words that he inscribes onto a white poster board. Art. Coding. Boxing. Table Tennis. Swimming Pool. Each word represents various students’ answers to one question: If you had an unlimited amount of money and space, what youth programs would you want?

Samuel Hyman contributed audio reporting.