

Ancient wisdom, modern therapy

FirefliesNY martial arts program helps kids with special needs grow & develop

By Leslev Grimm

When a child steps onto Lisa Chin's colorful tumbling mat, something beautiful happens. It's like a firefly lighting up the night sky. It is both unexpected and magical. For 45 precious minutes, children *are* children.

Between energetic sets of round house kicks and low blocks, students exude energy and brightness—and that is precisely how FirefliesNY earned its name.

FirefliesNY is a new Brooklyn-based martial arts and fitness program for kids with autism and Asperger's syndrome.

"The children really do come alive on the mat," said FirefliesNY founder Lisa Chin, who teaches classes from her home studio in Park Slope/Windsor Terrace and plans to move to a larger commercial venue.

Chin's venture combines her expertise and her passions. The 35-year-old is a special education teacher who has worked for the New York City Department of Education for the past six years.

She has taught children with various learning disabilities and behavioral disorders, including many youngsters who are on the autism spectrum.

Chin is also a black belt in taekwondo. She has studied the sport since she was just a young girl.

During FirefliesNY sessions, there is often laughter and giggles, and children sometimes make eye contact and speak a few words.

These kinds of exchanges are taken for granted by many parents, but they are treasured moments for parents of children with autism.

"I would come here every day if I could," said a beaming Suzanne Killen of Marine Park, watching on as her five-year-old son Ryan enjoyed an afternoon lesson.

"Ryan is more focused each time we come. He's more verbal and he's making better eye contact," Suzanne Killen said. "He normally wouldn't interact with anyone over his own height."

Autism, or more accurately "autism spectrum disorders," is a group of developmental disabilities affecting social interaction and communication. Impairments range from mild to severe.

The CDC estimates that 1 in 150 children in the United States are on the autism spectrum. Young Ryan has PDD-NOS or "pervasive development disorder—not otherwise specified."

"If I put him in a regular class, he would just get lost," said Ryan's mom Suzanne. "I needed someone who has dealt with a child like him before. If he has a meltdown, Lisa knows what to do."

But on this day, there are no meltdowns, only concentration and smiles. Young Ryan's eyes sparkle. He's clearly in his element, and his instructor feeds off of his energy.



Lisa Chin works with 5-year-old Ryan Killen during a session at FirefliesNY, a new martial arts and fitness program for children with autism and Asperger's syndrome. Photo by Leslev Grimm

Lisa Chin explains that it was a family tragedy that led her down a long path that finally resulted in the launch of FirefliesNY.

In 1990 Chin lost her younger sister in a car accident. Chin, along with other family members, was in the car at the time. They were driving to a family vacation.

The terrible accident triggered a long period of mourning and depression.

But after much self-reflection, Chin says she eventually emerged from her own darkness with a renewed optimism and zest for life. She began to focus on her how fortunate she was to survive the accident.

During college, Lisa Chin started volunteering with children with special needs, and later worked as the Aquatics Director for United Cerebral Palsy.

Six years ago, she started teaching spe-

cial education at M.S. 443 on 18th Street, the New Voices School for Academic and Creative Arts.

One of Chin's students wrote a persuasive writing piece about the need to incorporate more physical education in the classroom. That gave her the idea to introduce brief classroom fitness "breaks."

"We'd teach each other break-dancing, ballet, gymnastics and Taekwondo. They were just five minute snippets, but the resulting focus that came out of that, the concentration and academic progress—it was unbelievable," Chin said.

Once she saw the benefits, she said she realized the need to "take it out of the classroom somehow."

Chin started traveling to family's homes on the weekends to work with children on the spectrum, experimenting and perfecting her techniques. She said she became fascinated with the field of autism.

"I found that I had this unique connection with them, almost like a spiritual connection," Chin said. "I can really tap into their potential and bring out what they can offer, their talents, their strengths."

Chin's sessions are modeled on the technique called Applied Behavior Analysis, or ABA, which is a popular method for helping children on the spectrum.

ABA teaches skills by breaking them down into small steps or components. Students are given many opportunities to practice these steps and are showered with plenty of positive reinforcement.

Chin believes taekwondo lends itself to ABA therapy as it can be broken down into simple, basic steps that can then be combined.

As her students practice their moves, Chin keeps them motivated by slapping high-fives and cheering compliments like "Nice job!" and "Well done!"

Lessons at FirefliesNY involve a blend of Taekwondo, as well as balance, stretching and breathing exercises. Sessions are modified according to the age and the abilities of the child.

Music is also an important component, as children on the spectrum are very stimulated by sound. The familiarity of hearing the same songs week after week can also help some students feel comfortable and focused.

Sessions are available for children ages 3 and a half to fifteen. Classes are usually taught in small groups with the assistance of student volunteers from the M.S. 443.

Lisa Chin balks at the notion that martial arts can teach children to be aggressive.

"That's a huge misconception," Chin said. "In fact, it teaches them how to harness their energies, to self-regulate, to calm and to be relaxed."

Chin said kids on the spectrum often have low muscle tone and difficulty with balance. But as they improve their balance, strength and flexibility, they gain self-confidence and a sense of self-awareness.

"Children on the spectrum are the most loving, affectionate and happy children when you can really tap into them," Chin said.

"They're like the firefly in the night. You never see them, but then all of a sudden they light up and it's like *Ahhh!*"

For more information on FirefliesNY, contact Lisa Chin at (718) 355-9480 or email Lisa@FirefliesNY.com or visit www.firefliesny.com.