

fitness & fireflies

AN INTERVIEW WITH LISA CHIN

Lisa Chin is the dedicated founder of FirefliesNY, a program that develops strength, self-esteem, and peer interactive skills for young individuals with autism. Using martial arts as a modality to develop strength, coordination, flexibility, focus, and proprioception, and Applied Behavior Analysis as a teaching and structural methodology, Lisa has developed a dedicated following in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Since meeting Lisa, we have collaborated on several projects and she has been my returning guest on AutismOne radio.

***EC:** How did you come to work with the autism community?

***LC:** When I was a senior in high school, I lost my little sister, Tricia, in a fatal family car accident. My father and I were the only members of our family conscious to witness the accident... We almost lost 3 members of our family in one night. I struggled with 10 plus years of nightmares, reliving the gruesome details of the accident every night. In order to cope with the loss of my sister, I began to rationalize my life. I embraced the fact that I have been rather fortunate all my life, despite the death of my sister...and that it was time to give back. Thus, I began my work in the field of special education. I began by pioneering an aquatics program for United Cerebral Palsy, teaching individuals who had never walked on land to walk in the water. A colleague of mine convinced me to look into becoming a special education teacher.

For the past 7 years, I have been working with children with special needs. Many of my students were/are children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. I became fascinated with the field, researching the epidemiology, possible causes (environmental and genetic), and methods of remediation/therapy. I began employing what I was learning within my

classroom, reveling in the positive changes occurring in my students on a daily basis.

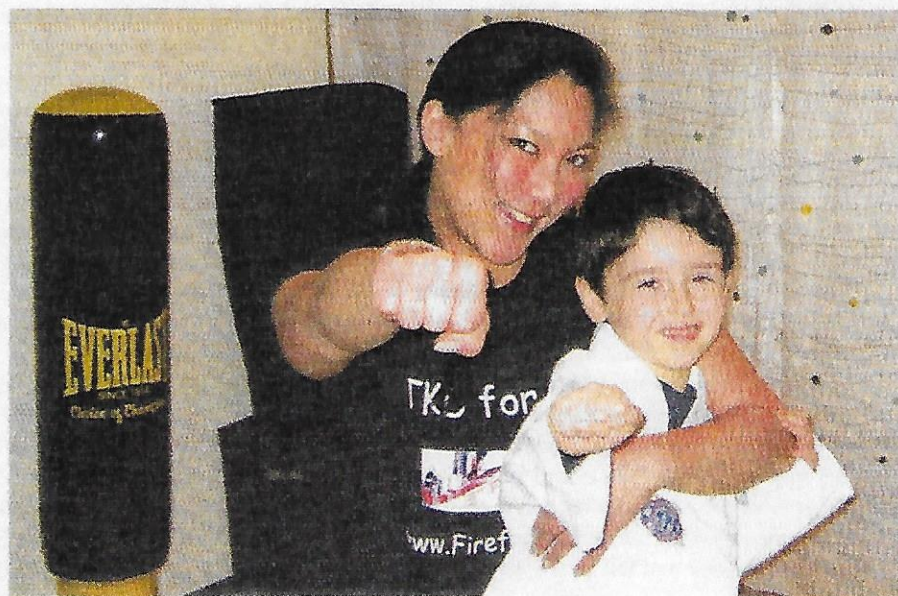
***EC:** How did your work develop into FirefliesNY?

***LC:** I began formulating the concept of FirefliesNY within my classroom. It all began with the teaching of persuasive writing! One of my students chose to write his persuasive essay on why schools should incorporate more physical fitness into the curriculum. As I shared with him my memories of three hours of daily swim practice followed by an hour of Tae Kwon Do, he became even more motivated in his writing. Together we decided to incorporate more physical fitness into our classroom. Between each period, we began having "boot camp" breaks. For 5 to 10 minutes between periods, the students and I would take turns leading the "boot camp," teaching one another Tae Kwon Do, yoga, pilates, break dancing, gymnastics, etc. After a while, we even began incorporating music. The resulting focus, concentration, and motivation to learn during aca-

demical lessons were beautiful! Research has shown that the physical feeds the cognitive. My classroom further supported the research! I shared this with my colleagues, and, with their encouragement, I decided to take my "boot camp" to another level outside of the classroom. Thus, FirefliesNY was born.

I wanted to scream to the world that children with special needs have a lot to offer. Once we tap into a child's (with or without special needs) multiple intelligences, and figure out what motivates them, we can lead them toward independence. In particular, I wanted to break down the misconceptions/stereotypes of children with Autism Spectrum Disorders. Many people believe that children with autism are incapable of showing affect, void of emotion, and socially inept. Not true!

In November 2006, I posted FirefliesNY on Craigslist.org. I also expanded my knowledge of autism/PDD-NOS by receiving training as an Applied Behavior Analyst, and providing early



intervention (ABA therapy for children before the age of 3).

***EC:** What are the goals of FirefliesNY?

***LC:** Many people are under the misconception that Tae Kwon Do will teach a child (whether on the spectrum or not) to be more aggressive/violent. In fact, it teaches exactly the opposite. At FirefliesNY, we believe the study of martial arts can help an autistic child build strong bridges between mind and body, between the child's inside self and the outside world. Tae Kwon Do can bring a sense of calmness and peace, both physically and spiritually, that increases focus, reduces stress, reduces anxiety and aggression, prevents or minimizes "meltdowns," and helps the autistic child progress more smoothly along their often rocky path. At FirefliesNY, children have the opportunity to release their pent up frustrations and energies on non-human objects, practice self-regulation techniques, and learn socialization skills in an inclusionary setting.

***EC:** Many parents are concerned that their child will not be able to "handle" physical activity or cannot adapt to a program. Who is the typical athlete in your program?

***LC:** Is there such a thing as a typical athlete? At FirefliesNY, we believe that anyone and everyone can be an athlete. We simply guide the students in discovering what kind of an athlete they would like to mold themselves into. FirefliesNY offers sessions to children on all levels of the spectrum from the ages of 3.5 to 15 years old. We have 4-year-olds on the spectrum who have incredible form and technique that are working on increasing their muscle tone, balance, and stability. We also have 8- and 15-year-old neurotypical volunteers who have great muscle tone, balance and stability, but are working on increasing their flexibility, form/technique and self-regulation abilities. We are all athletes in our own ways.

***EC:** What does a typical session look like?

***LC:** With a background of motivational instrumental music on colorful interlocking mats, we begin each session with stretching and breathing exercises, inhaling through the nose and out through the mouth. After the students' bodies have limbered and relaxed, we start with the basic movements: the basic stances which provide balance, squaring of the shoulders, the folding of the fist, flexing of the wrists and ankles, pointing of the toes, and bending of the knees. We then build upon the foundations, leading into the gross motor skills: punches, knife hands, front kicks, side kicks, side snap kicks, round house kicks, etc. Initially the children focus on solely the technique. Then they focus on extending the technique toward a target (inflatable Everlast bag, a large hand held body shield, and a small hand held double striker which the kids have nicknamed Mr. Whale). Once the basics have been learned, we incorporate more challenging techniques such as combining the moves, kicking from a balance beam, jumping over a moving object and then striking a target, jumping kicks, and reverse kicks and punches. The students practice self-regulation (standing still while waiting their turn), taking turns, and interacting/supporting one another. We wind down each session by cooling down, stretching the muscles and limbs, and breathing focusing once again on control and self-regulation. ☒

For more information on Lisa Chin and FirefliesNY, visit www.firefliesny.com.



Eric Chessen is a Fitness Consultant and Therapist working exclusively with the young autism population. His new DVD, *Beyond Boundaries: Fitness for the Young Autism Population*, can be found at www.bbfttdvd.com.