

It Takes a Village

WESLEY COMMUNITY CENTER IS PART OF A COLLECTIVE EFFORT NURTURING CHILDREN AND FAMILIES IN AMARILLO, TEXAS.

by **GABRIEL RAMOS-ROCCHIO** and **NILE SPRAGUE**

Girls participate in the wrestling program at Wesley Community Center in Amarillo, Texas.



Nile Sprague

“If you don't pass, you don't play,” Coach Tony Hernandez said, explaining the requirement to participate in the wrestling program at United Methodist Women-supported Wesley Community Center in Amarillo, Texas.

“It's not just about wrestling,” he said. “We're trying to make kids strong overall. We want them to know wrestling is only part of what they're doing. We try to teach our kids to be

healthy. Kids, if they're strong in anything, if they have a strong belief, they will do well in life, and I think wrestling proves that to everyone.”

If “it takes a village to raise a child,” as the old saying goes, Wesley Community Center is part of that collective effort nurturing children and families in Amarillo.

United Methodist Women at Polk Street United Methodist Church led by

Maria Fields started Wesley Community in 1951. Today, in a neighborhood of Amarillo where poverty rates are high and 97 percent of elementary school children are eligible for the federal lunch program, Wesley Community Center aims to enrich the lives of anyone who participates, regardless of their religion or beliefs. Its services range from senior citizen lunch and game programs to children's day care to mental health serv-

Young boys wrestle under the watchful eye of Coach Tony Hernandez at Wesley Community Center in Amarillo, Texas.



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ices to youth programs like their very popular “Behind-the-Scenes” modeling program and wrestling.

Wrestling club

The wrestling club was the second largest in the area in February 2010; by March it was the largest, explained Belinda Gonzalez Taylor, executive director of the Wesley Community Center. Why? “Because of the core values,” Ms. Taylor said.

“First, two knees for thankfulness every night,” she said. “We’re trying to instill in our children to live a life of gratitude, and that we have a higher power, and we’re not in control. Second, good nutrition. They get weighed in every Friday, and we know if they’ve been drinking Cokes or eating candy and not sticking to a strict regimen of eating healthy, because they have to

maintain weight in order to wrestle. And third, grades. They have to have good grades before they can compete.”

Aralita Alarcon became guardian of her grandchildren when their father went to jail to serve a 2 ½-year sentence, and their mother went to rehab. Wesley is an important part of the “village” she’s engaged to help with her labor of love.

“My grandchildren have come a long way with me,” she said. “They never got discipline from their mother. At first they wouldn’t listen to me. They wouldn’t obey. They’ve learned the dos and don’ts, to have respect, discipline.”

Discipline is very important part of the Wesley Community Center program.

“I’m a fifth-grade school teacher and if you don’t have discipline in the

classroom, you can not teach,” said Mr. Hernandez, who has worked with the center for eight of the wrestling programs 12 years of existence. “The little ones need to understand that if the coach is talking, you don’t talk. The kids need structure.”

Charles Bame has three children in the wrestling program and also appreciates Wesley Center’s reinforcement of his discipline patterns for his children.

“It’s nice to have someone else bark orders at them besides me, so they can learn to obey rules in the real world,” he said. “My son didn’t push himself with anything. When he got into wrestling he really started trying, getting a little bit of success in his system, whetting his appetite to try harder at other things.”

When the children and youth talk about the center, words like *commit-*

ment, focus, discipline, less aggression, better grades, nutrition and self-esteem peppered their sentences. Jason Griego, 10, is an example. His mother said before he came to the center other children picked on him because he was small. That has changed.

“Before wrestling I felt like I couldn’t do anything,” said Jason, now in his fourth year in the club. “Now, I know I can stick up for myself. ... Now, I want to go to the Olympics.”

The Nanes sisters, Naomi, 12, and Samara, 8, glowed when speaking about wrestling.

“I used to play a lot and disobey the coaches,” confessed Samara.

“I used to talk back,” added Naomi. “Now, I’m good at not throwing an attitude.”

Naomi won first prize in state wrestling competitions. Samara took second place in Houston and first place in Amarillo.

Rosario Nanes, Samara and Naomi’s mother, is also glad the wrestling club encourages healthy eating habits. “The program keeps them disciplined with their weight. Obesity is a problem,” she said. “They don’t eat hot dogs or burgers. They don’t drink sodas. When they were younger, I had that stuff in the house. I was a big Coke drinker, but not anymore.”

Project runway

Like the wrestling club, Wesley’s “Behind-the-Scenes” modeling program also does much more than teach youth how to dress or grace a catwalk. Rather, modeling is used to prepare youth for a world of opportunities.

“We use modeling to draw them in,” said Sarena San Miguel, Wesley’s youth development and marketing director.

Bottom, Cintia Ceballos tries out make-up and develops leadership skills in the modeling program depicted on the mural, below, at Wesley Community Center in Amarillo, Texas,



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“If we called it a youth [trouble] prevention program, they wouldn’t come, but if it’s called youth modeling, then they’re like, ‘Hey, let’s go to this!’”

Once a modeling program participant herself, Ms. San Miguel returned to volunteer as a choreographer for the dance routines the models perform and went on to become director of the year-round effort. During the school year, youth come to the modeling program 6-8 p.m. weekdays. In the summer, the



Jazmin Urbina gains confidence necessary for success through Wesley’s “Behind the Scenes” modeling program.

program runs 1-5 p.m. They pay \$20 for the sessions and another \$20 for a photo shoot and a portfolio at the end of the program.

Ms. San Miguel develops curriculum for two different age groups: Kids Connection, ages 8-12, and Youth Connection, ages 13-17. The curricu-

lum has less to do with fashion modeling and more to do with behavioral modeling. Each session focuses on different themes such as getting to know you, celebration of me, resisting negative peer pressure, dealing with substance abuse, friends and family, confidence and uniqueness.

“Every session is a group discussion,” Ms. San Miguel said. “We’ll sit back and let the kids figure their problems out without us intervening, unless they come across a problem they can’t solve, then they’ll come to us or go to our social worker.”

Girls are the majority of the 70 youth who participate in the program each year.

“It’s hard to keep boys, because they have football and wrestling practice right after school,” Ms. San Miguel said. “And the boys act like they have no self-image problems. We’ve had a few boys who made it to the end. But one of the boys who stuck with us ended up getting a scholarship for being a leader. He liked to break-dance, and he brought in students who thought this place was only for girls.”

Leadership development is another product of the program. Ms. San Miguel depends on some of her older students to step up and take on the responsibility of becoming student leaders. Youth are eligible to be student leaders when they’re in high school, and help facilitate the program.


“They’re chosen by showing leadership ability, dedication to the program, and academic excellence,” she said. “It’s important that they’re confident and super positive. We give them a contract, asking them to do 10 hours of community service per session at Wesley, and they’ll receive a \$250 scholarship every session.”

Zuleica Varela, 16, has been part of the Behind-the-Scenes for four years and was one of the young women chosen to be a student leader.

“Sarena asked me to be a student leader, to help out the girls that needed more confidence. I used to be one of them, so I knew what it felt like,” she said. “When I first got into the program, the student leaders helped me feel good about myself, more confident, and I thought it’d be great to help girls the same way I was helped.”

Ms. Varela recalled being rather shy when she first joined Behind the Scenes. “I didn’t know anybody. I came by myself,” she said. “Right off the bat they make you talk, so you get used to it, and comfortable with it, and from there they brought it out of me. We get to meet a lot of cool new people, important people. We met the mayor.”

Melissa Carnero, 20, also participated in the modeling program and is a student leader. She drew strength from the program’s sharing and self-examination component. “We talked a lot about ourselves and shared stuff that we normally wouldn’t share with anyone else,” Ms. Carnero said. “The older girls helped the younger ones, and it was good to know that we all trusted each other, like a big family.”

Ms. Varela and Ms. Carnero are only two that Wesley Community Center’s programs have helped to realize their potential. It’s a listening post and a guiding rail and a vital part of the “village” rearing children in Amarillo. 

Nile Sprague, a photojournalist based in Mendocino, Calif., and **Gabriel Ramos-Rocchio** is a freelance journalist, poet and horticulturist in New York City.