

Coaching kids to build self-confidence through sports



Alex Gardner, a volunteer coach at Yorkville Youth Athletic Association, helps instill in his team, the Sun Devils, the importance of a positive attitude. Photo: ©2011 Legends Photography LINYC

When Arlene A. Virga met Fred Stimler, one of the founders of Yorkville Youth Athletic Association (YYAA) in 1990, her three sons were toddlers. “He handed me his card and five years later we started working together,” she recalls.

From that time in 1995 to the present, the non-profit, located on Manhattan’s Upper East Side, has grown from serving 200 to 6,000 children annually in New York and developed a mission that encourages positive attitudes and maturity through teamwork, sportsmanship, integrity and fun in sports, music, drama programs, leagues and camps. The curriculum, which consisted of basketball and baseball in those early years, has also mushroomed to include everything from lacrosse, roller hockey, soccer and tennis to theatre arts, travel programs and the Yorkville Baseball Academy. Next month the organization will open up the Yorkville Basketball Academy.

Originally started in 1967 as a neighborhood group, Yorkville Youth Council, YYAA is “all about community and making sure that all boys and girls can play sports in a safe, fun and caring environment,” says Virga. As the Association’s executive director, she oversees all the programs as well more than 700 vol-

unteers (including alumni players who return to coach) on a yearly basis.

“When I wanted to add a gym, a field or a new program to Yorkville Youth, Fred Stimler’s favorite line was ‘that’s a no brainer.’ Before we knew it Yorkville had really grown,” says the devoted director and mother of three whose other full-time job is nursery school teacher. She adds that the community programs have remained extremely affordable so that all children can have access.

“In the early days – as she transitioned to her leadership position – Arlene was willing to take risks and fight battles not for her own benefit, but for the entire Yorkville community,” says Stimler, who passed the wand to Virga in 2000 and now lives in Florida. “She dreamed about growing the programs beyond the few hundred children served so that many more neighborhood kids would benefit.

“Her leadership is inspired. And she’s brought a great group of parents along with her – training them to recognize that sportsmanship and community are more important than individual objectives,” he recalls.

One of those great parents, Alex Gardner, a father of two sons that are both active in the program, has been a volunteer Yorkville parent-coach for over a decade. He started coaching T-ball when his youngest son, Max,

was four. Both his sons (Max, now 14, and Peter, 11) have enjoyed playing the sports the Association offers. And Gardner spends his weekends during the school year coaching basketball, baseball and flag football.

“When I started I was looking for a community program with dads coaching that essentially had a wide range of sports. Arlene runs one of the only volunteer organized, multi-sports programs on the Upper East Side of Manhattan,” he explains.

“I had a terrific father but he was not a jock; he was not a throw-the-ball-around kind of guy,” he says.

As the oldest of three, Gardner was always running sports activities in his backyard but he learned the real fundamentals of sports at an overnight camp in the Berkshires. “I went away to camp as a non-athlete and ended up athletic,” he says.

During law school, Gardner got the bug when he coached his nephew at Safe Haven Basketball, a league on the Upper West Side. Now it’s in his blood.

“I understand that not every parent is able to teach their kids the fundamentals of various sports. I hope that my players will learn life lessons through my passion for the game,” says the avid runner who has finished the NYC marathon every year since 1998.

He also says that meeting other dad coaches was an unexpected plus.

“We speak a common language. We became good friends through the process,” he explains. “My kids also get to make a large group of peers outside of their school environment. If we lived in Larchmont, everyone would play in the Larchmont Little League. In Manhattan, kids are all over the map. Yorkville provides a community through sports,” he says.

“I try to get my players to be passionate about their team and their sport and to feel better about themselves. I try to be a good role model and be positive at all times,” he muses.

“I remember all of my favorite coaches. I hope that the kids will remember me just as they remember their favorite teacher.”

For more information about Yorkville Youth Athletic Association, call (212) 360-0022 or visit www.yyaa.org.

– Holly Reich

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