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Golden opportunity

For two KCK teens, the recent opening of Turner Boxing Club has helped them change their lives.

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Daniel Barajas isn't allowed to throw punches at people. He has thrown too many already, which is why he's dancing in the ring on Wednesday night, jabbing at nothing.

In the streets, he learned how to punch. Here, he learns timing, patience, concentration.

Barajas' trainers at Turner Boxing Club are testing his will. He gives them a lengthy set of push-ups, then a set of crunches. He finishes with a weary smile.

"You hurt?" friend Silvia Marin asks him.

"No," Barajas says, shaking his head.

Marin is just finishing up her workout. She has spent the last hour moving in place, her gloves held tightly in front, giving the air a good 1-2.

Barajas and Marin don't need opponents. They fight against their reputations. People don't ever forget in Turner, the close-knit Kansas City, Kan., neighborhood.

Among his peers, Barajas is the little thug who wears blue bandanas and therefore is in a gang, the kid who never turns down a fight.

Marin is the girl from the Argentine neighborhood who beat up those two Mexican sisters.

"I went to school the next day," Marin says, "and someone goes, 'We heard you stabbed somebody at the club!' Are you kidding me? I don't walk around with guns and knives in my pockets."

She now has another alternative to vent her frustrations, ever since this spacious, state-of-the-art boxing gym opened three weeks ago. That day couldn't have come soon enough for Barajas, 17, and Marin, 18. It's been a long and dreary school year, a year begun in the midst of tragedy. It could have swallowed them up.

The echoes could be heard all over Turner. Silvia's best friend, Diana Tovalin, was shot and killed at a party in the Central neighborhood on Aug. 6.

Diana had just turned 17. A straight-A student, she was going to graduate from Turner this year with Silvia. Diana hoped that one day she would be a teacher.

Diana ran away from her family on Halloween of the previous year, staying with friends such as Silvia for the nine months before she died. Silvia didn't even get to say goodbye.

The night Diana died, a part of Silvia went with her. She couldn't help but feel she had let Diana down - her friends had always depended on her to be the mom. After a few weeks, her senior year had started, and life went on. But Silvia's nightmares didn't stop.

"She used to sleep with me in my bed," Silvia says. "I've had dreams where I lean over, and she's in the bed next to me, but her face isn't there."

Barajas heard about Tovalin's death from his cousin. The murder got his attention, but being a veteran of street fights, it didn't scare him.

"I was still into being hard at that time," Daniel says.

Daniel was first asked to join a gang when he was 9 years old. He never joined, but many of his friends are in one.

"If I said I never thought about it, I'd be a liar," Daniel says. "I thought maybe if I joined a gang, people would respect me more."

Daniel still wore exclusively blue, which has tied him to several gangs, including the Crips and the F-13s.

One day a few years ago, he was walking to a friend's house, and a man started calling him derogatory names related to the blue-affiliated gangs. Daniel had never seen him before. The man got in Daniel's face, flashing signs, and Daniel pushed him. The man punched Daniel, who proceeded to pummel him.

"He was laid out for a little bit," Daniel says. "I watched his friends carry him off. I wanted to keep fighting."

Drive around Turner with Daniel, and he can point out the exact spots of his fights. There was always a moment when Daniel could have walked away.

"If somebody disrespected me," Daniel says, "I would want the respect from them, so I'd win it that way. I was always the kind of dude who had to be out in front."

At school, Daniel began to lose focus. He just wanted to play baseball, his lifelong love, and flirt with girls.

Last year, at the end of his sophomore year at Turner, a counselor counted up his credits.

In two years, he had completed 8. He needed 23 to graduate. Daniel's grades were so bad he wasn't allowed to play baseball for the first time in years.

"I had to quit messing around," Daniel says. "Or I'll be like these dudes I make fun of. One of my friends is 20 years old, and he's still in high school."

On Nov. 12, something big was happening across town at Memorial Hall. A group of local boxing advocates, including John Brown of Ringside Products and former pro fighter Tony Chiaverini, put on a charity boxing event called "Guns and Hoses," which put cops and firefighters against each other in the ring.

The event netted about \$100,000, 25 percent of which went to a fund for local amateur boxing. Gyms all over the city were closing down every year, including the Guadalupe Center and the Argentine Parish House near Turner. Brown discovered that there really wasn't a legitimate boxing gym in all of Kansas City, Kan.

"It's ridiculous, and the reason is really clear," Brown says. "Nobody has the funds for it, and the most difficult ingredient is the human one. No one has the knowledge or the skill to devote to it."

Brown and company approached the people at the old Turner Recreation building at 55th and Miami. They said Brown could have the entire third floor, which was previously abandoned and dilapidated.

When word of a new boxing gym made it to Daniel in late November, he immediately joined up at Turner Rec. He had always wanted to box and, because of all that practice on the streets, thought he'd be a natural.

During the winter, the trips to Turner Rec. gave Daniel somewhere to focus his energy as he toiled away at Endeavor, where he had been attending school since September. Endeavor helps kids who are behind in school like Daniel make up credits in a short amount of time.

Daniel was up at Turner Rec. all the time, lifting weights, waiting for the gym to open.

"Every day I'd go up there and train my butt off," Daniel says. "I slowed down fighting on the streets. That's dumb. It's going to get me shot and arrested. I can do this now. It's actually going to take some time and skill to fight a person."

While Daniel was getting ready for opening day, 12 to 14 volunteers were busy on the third floor, knocking out the walls of old classrooms, painting and laying down carpet.

"I've never seen so many people work together to get something going," says Camille White, office manager at Turner Rec. "Just seeing people up there sweating, cleaning

toilets, scrubbing floors so that they could offer something free to kids, to keep them off the streets - that within itself was pretty awesome."

Silvia hadn't seen much of the streets this year. Since Diana's death, Silvia's group of friends had pretty much broken up. Brenda dropped out of school. Ashley, Amanda and Jackie all transferred to different schools. Silvia looked around one day at Turner and felt like she had no friends.

This was not the senior year she'd always dreamed of. For the first time in years, Silvia wasn't playing any sports or holding down a job after school.

"I sat around and cleaned the house," Silvia says. "It's boring. You feel useless. The days just drag by, and there's nothing to do."

On March 20, the Turner Boxing Club opened its doors. Brown and the rest of the volunteers were nervous; the prevailing theory was that kids didn't want to box anymore.

But that night, more than 50 kids of all ages walked into the 3,100-square-foot room with bright yellow walls, red trim and blue carpet.

"We haven't advertised this at all," says Dan Brayman, the volunteer who put in the most time. "It's unbelievable."

Brayman and Brown are almost certain that this club, which once brought in over 90 kids in one night, is the most popular amateur boxing club in the country. All but two of the kids in the program have never boxed before.

Daniel and Silvia are training with the oldest group, which meets four times a week. On days when the gym isn't open, they try to find another place to hit the bag or lift weights downstairs.

"I haven't gotten to spar yet," Daniel says. "I want to take everything slow, get as much training as I need before I get in the ring. I may think I'm bad out here, then get in the ring and get my butt kicked in a minute flat."

The motto at the gym is, "This is for here, not the streets." If challenged on the street, could Daniel walk away this time?

"I don't know if I'm fully honest answering this," Daniel says, "but I probably could walk away. I haven't been tested like that yet."

Silvia loves boxing because it relieves her of her boredom.

"I like to be challenged," Silvia says. "It's something to look forward to. I go to boxing,

and the day goes by like that, and I look forward to the next day. I haven't been excited about anything like this for a long time."

Sitting in her mom's small Turner apartment, Silvia feels the expectations of her entire family. Nobody else from her generation has gone to college.

"My uncles are like, 'You're the only hope for somebody to get out of here and be somebody,' " Silvia says. "My mom wants me to have and do the things that she never could."

Above Silvia, on a tall shelf, is a framed picture of Diana, smiling, wearing a black shirt and jeans. It's a daily reminder of where Silvia could have gone this year. Instead, Silvia is going to go to Johnson County Community College. She hopes to transfer to Kansas in two years. She wants to become a lawyer one day. Through it all, she wants to keep boxing.

"I want to get out," Silvia says. "But to be able to do anything, being Hispanic, is hard. People think you won't ever be anything because you're Hispanic. It makes me want to go out and do something because I don't want to be flipping burgers at McDonald's all my life."

On Friday night, Daniel wears a plain white T, baggy blue jean shorts and a navy blue Royals hat. He refuses to stop wearing blue every day. "It's my style," he says.

Other than wearing blue, it appears Daniel's style is changing. He has had the same girlfriend for this entire school year. He's doing well in his Geometry class, so well that his classmates ask him for help. Daniel recently read all of the Dan Brown books, including "Angels and Demons" and "The Da Vinci Code."

"I'm starting to get more serious all of a sudden," Daniel says. "I'm always going to the gym, hitting the bag, talking to my girlfriend and going to sleep. I've wanted to concentrate on a few things and that's it."

Daniel makes a stop at a QuikTrip close to his house. He gets out of the car and recognizes an older guy in the parking lot. Daniel says he needs to go talk to him for a second. He's back after a few minutes and explains.

"That's an older guy who I heard was messing with my younger brother," Daniel says. "I just told him that's what I'd heard, and he denied it. You know, before, I probably would have fought him."

Before boxing is what Daniel means. He gets back in the car, which takes him out of Turner, up I-635 to I-70 and all the way to the Truman Sports Complex, where the Kansas City Golden Gloves tournament is going on at the Clarion Hotel.

"Never been around here," Daniel says upon walking into the hotel. "Nice place."

He walks into the grand ballroom, which seats about 800 people, and sees the ring in the middle of the room, glowing in the spotlight.

"This is the stuff I've been dreaming of right here," Daniel says. "I want to put some gloves on right now."

The Golden Gloves are the reason that Turner Boxing Club was created. Brown wants to start a new club every year, just like Turner, to restore the once-proud event. The Golden Gloves used to draw hundreds of boxers and 8,000 people to Municipal Auditorium.

But Daniel doesn't know or care that this Golden Gloves isn't the best. Every couple of minutes, Daniel moves back in his seat and sighs, "Aw, man."

"I'm getting on my own nerves right now," he says.

Daniel is nervous and he's not even fighting. Just imagine next year, when he hopes to make his Golden Gloves debut.

"I think I'm going to find a bag to hit tomorrow," Daniel says. "If I can't do it tonight."