

The Miami Herald

Posted on Thu, Jul. 12, 2012

Visually impaired kids learn judo at Miami Lighthouse

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The Miami Herald



Rodolfo Roman / For The Miami Herald

Christopher Collado, 11, and sensei Delcides Diaz review a Judo technique at the Miami Lighthouse, which has several programs for the visually impaired and blind. The program is offered during the summer. The sport helps children with self-esteem, balance and defense techniques.

Judo sensei Delcides Diaz has been practicing and teaching the martial art for years. He says it takes time for learners to perfect the technique.

But, Diaz says the visually impaired and blind children he teaches at the Miami Lighthouse, 601 SW Eighth Ave., learn the technique faster than normal kids.

“They listen and practice the maneuvers exactly how you tell them to do it. Their concentration is major,” said Diaz, of Mambi Judo in Hialeah Gardens. “They have perfect technique. Normal children take months to learn, but these kids learn it in a day.”

That’s why the sport is being taught at the institution for the second year as part of the school’s summer program, which started June 11 and ends July 20. There are 45 children enrolled

in the summer program, and all of them participate in judo. The children, who range from ages 5 to 13 years of age, attend Judo class twice a week for an hour.

Visually impaired student Christopher Collado, 11, used his skills to prove a point that the sport is a life-changer.

“I like the martial arts part of it; it’s about competing against others,” he said, while wearing his Gi robe. “It’s basically having that skill.”

Isabel Chica, manager of the Lighthouse’s children’s program, said the sport is beneficial for the kids.

“It’s positive for their self-esteem,” she said. “They can see that they can participate in the sport and be successful at it.”

The sport is popular at the Paralympic games, a sporting event where people with physical disabilities compete.

The Miami Lighthouse has been housed in a three floor building in Little Havana area for 80 years. It has programs for the visually impaired and blind from birth to death. Children also learn arts and crafts, technology, music, social skills, Braille literacy and physical fitness. The school is paid for by the Department of Education, private donations and grants. The summer program is funded by the Miami-Dade Children’s Trust.

Diaz said the children are learning about themselves through the practice of judo.

“They can also defend themselves from anyone,” he said. “Judo educates people internally. They liberate themselves physically and mentally.”

In the 60-minute class, students practice flips, tosses and grappling.

Diaz, a fifth-degree black belt in judo, said the children have many possibilities.

“There is a lot of talent here,” he said.

As for Christopher, not only is he learning to defend himself, but he will soon be a master at releasing tension.

“It teaches me how to relax,” he said.

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