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Kevin Williams, ASPIRA Recreation Coordinator, congratulates a participant after he made a tough catch.

Mott Haven community center is reborn

Critics mourn an end to boxing at Betances

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By Lindsay Lazarski

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For years the thumping of fists pounding punching bags, the scuffle of sneakers and the grunts of athletes were the sounds a visitor heard at the Betances Community Center and Boxing Gym.

Now, the scratch of pencils and flip of workbook pages fill the newly renovated center. Betances has dropped “Boxing Gym” from its name and has a new mission under new operators.

The last four years have been rocky for the community center. It was considered a home to many boxers and residents who grew up in and around the New York City Housing Authority's 13-building complex in Mott Haven. In 2005 the center closed for a gut renovation and the center's programs were moved to nearby schools or across the street to St. Mary's Park and center.

Rebuilt at the cost of \$10 million and designed to remain a boxing gym, the community center was praised by architects as one of the best construction projects of 2008. But the Housing Authority's fiscal problems forced the center to close its doors after a few months.

The handsome airy space, which includes features like central air conditioning and heating, a brand new kitchen loaded with stainless steel appliances, and orange bleachers that retract at the push of a button, appeared untouched, until late February.

Through a one-year city contract, ASPIRA, a national Hispanic organization, reopened the doors of Betances.

Dr. Luis Osorio, the new program director, has high hopes. ASPIRA plans eventually to serve 1,000 children. Currently close to 100 children are fully enrolled.

ASPIRA aims for Betances to become a "mecca," said Osorio—"a place where children feel they are safe, they are heard, and can develop their minds and bodies."

Rather than focus on boxing, under ASPIRA the center emphasizes academics and the arts. Now, after a snack of donuts and grape juice, the participants in its after-school program break into study groups for tutorial sessions in reading, math and spelling.

Only after their school-work is complete do the kids participate in an organized game of two-hand touch football, practice salsa dance steps or face off across the ping pong table.

The changes do not sit well with those who ran the program in years past.

"It pains me—it pains all of us who know the community. We became a family," said Edwin Guzman, who served as the Housing Authority's Community Director for nine years. He had hoped to expand the boxing program, which has produced many Golden Glove fighters.

Guzman and other former staff members of the center have been reassigned to other locations throughout the Bronx.

Luis Olmo, a former trainer and coach at Betances, said the boxing program was about more than just fighting. "If there is no boxing program you are pushing kids out on the street," said Olmo.

“The name ‘boxer’ gives you respect—your attitude changes, you walk differently, you talk differently, you dress differently and you have a dream. It’s an Olympian sport,” Olmo said.

The permanent boxing ring purchased by Guzman now sits in storage. In its place will be a portable ring, said Osorio, to leave space for other activities.

With the emphasis on academics first, Osorio said, the former boxing program will be replaced with “Physical Fitness through the Art of Boxing.” Kids will exercise through lightweight training, jumping rope and practicing other forms of aerobics, boxing and martial arts.

After 5 p.m. and on weekends, Osorio envisions offering services for adults, such as GED and job readiness classes and financial literacy training. He plans to start groups for young men who want to become better fathers and gain custodial rights of their children.

Amanda Perez, 21, started going to Betances when she was 6 years old. She recalled its impact on her and worries about the changes coming.

“A lot of talented boxers and dancers came out of Betances,” Perez said. “Kids wanted to go there.” Like Olmo, she said the center was “about taking kids off the street. Hopefully they get the same attention and amount of kids as in years past.”

Osorio said he understands the concern about change. “ASPIRA is not here for the short term. As long as the city can provide funding, we are here to provide services,” he said.

He has hired new staff members who are familiar with the community and has tried to reach out to meet with parents and principals at nearby schools.

Some parents like Wanda Lopez are encouraged by the new direction of Betances. She has enrolled her 12-year-old daughter in the program and says friends and family members have asked her where they can apply.

“Parents can be put at ease that their children are not in the streets. As a mother I love it,” said Lopez.