

And now for something completely different:

HEEBONICS

Kids learn confidence through judo, trainer says

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Erez Cohen didn't exactly plan to move to Canada. But since he arrived here about two years ago, the 29-year-old personal trainer and former Mr. Israel has certainly been making his mark in Toronto.



Erez Cohen, centre, teaches judo to kids with behavioural problems. From left are Maurice Fidd 7, Angel Araujo, 7, Jasiah Morgridge, 8.

"I came to visit a friend of mine and one thing led to another, I started to train one person, and a month after, I'm living here," he said, laughing.

Cohen was born in a rough neighbourhood in B'nei Brak, Israel, and, after extensive study in martial arts, went on to serve in the elite anti-terror unit in the Israel Defence Forces for four years.

Certified in judo since the age of 16, Cohen was a five-time national judo champion in Israel and also earned a spot on the Israeli national Olympic team.

In Canada, he joined the judo team competing in the 2009 Maccabiah Games. Though Cohen is accomplished in both sambo, a Russian martial art, and krav maga, an Israeli hand-to-hand combat system, he maintains that judo is the most

powerful martial art form.

"It gives the physical and spiritual side as well," he said, adding that judo allows smaller fighters to beat their larger opponents through the use of simple laws of physics.

Since coming to Toronto, Cohen worked with the children of some of his training clients, teaching them judo in order to build their confidence. According to Cohen, judo has been a form of therapy for some of these kids, giving them the self-esteem to overcome problems with bullying at school.

It was these positive results that led Cohen to offer his training skills to children with behavioural issues at Yorkwoods Public School, in the Jane Street and Finch Avenue area.

He spends an hour and a half each week with the behavioural intensive support program class of four kids aged six to eight, engaging them in physical activity and teaching them teamwork and co-operative skills through sport.

"They so look forward to it," said Barb Nyman, who teaches the behavioural class with the help of child and youth worker Melissa Hardy. Nyman added that the physical activity and the emphasis Cohen puts on teamwork helps the kids work through problems with aggression.

"I remember when I was a kid, no one really did anything like this for us," said



Erez Cohen leads a judo lesson at Yorkwoods Public School.

Cohen, who recalls growing up in an underprivileged community. According to Hardy, Cohen not only provides the kids with a new set of skills, but also gives them a strong and caring male role model, something that many of them are missing.

"I love those kids, they're very sweet," said Cohen, going on to describe the pictures they made him for his birthday.

"It was the best present," he said, adding

that, because the children see their judo lessons as a game, it's easier for them to work together and to cheer each other on.

"The idea is to get them slowly integrated into a larger classroom atmosphere," said

Nyman, explaining that the control the children learn in Cohen's lessons helps them work towards this goal. Also, the opportunity to interact with a new teacher-figure enriches the students' learning experience.

It is for this reason that Cohen makes an effort to bring other people with him to the classroom, including his brother and friends with martial arts experience.

"It's a good thing for [the people that come to help], you feel satisfied after," said Cohen.

When Cohen is not at Yorkwoods Public School, he is

busy training his clients. As his client list expanded to its current 200 members, Cohen decided to open a gym to better serve the growing demand. About two months ago, he started Powerclub with his brother, Oren, who moved to Toronto from Israel only a few months ago.

The boutique gym, designed with Cohen's help, is modern and sleek, featuring an army-themed martial arts room and change-room countertops imported from Israel.

Cohen's penchant for interior design extends from his love of art and painting, a talent of his that clients are quick to pick up on and support. He has already sold a few paintings, and has others on display around the city.

Cohen's oldest client is 85, and has no trouble keeping up. Cohen attributes his success with clients to the extensive four-year course that certified him as a personal trainer in Israel, where he learned kinesiology and physiology.

"Not anyone that can make you sweat is a good trainer," he said.

Cohen hopes to expand his gym and to bring martial arts competitors from Israel and train them to compete in Canada. This coming summer, he plans to take some of his Canadian clients to Israel for an intensive fitness training camp. Cohen, whose family still lives in Israel, goes home to visit several times each year.

But he doesn't feel like much of a stranger in Toronto.

"The Jewish community here is something that you never see anywhere," he said. "The way that they're working together and helping each other, supporting each other – it's very rare."