

Lebanon pro boxer led a life on the streets. Now, his life's work is to help at-risk youth

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LEBANON – A bell rings and a green light turns on. The kids have three minutes at their assigned stations – jumping rope, hitting bags, running on the treadmill, shadow boxing in a mirror, and hitting pads in the ring with professional boxer Nicolas “The Living Dream” Hernandez.

The makeshift gym is in Ferrer Motorsports, an automotive shop in Lebanon. The walls are adorned with photos from past fights and fight promotions. It has a ring at one end and bags hanging by chains at the other.

Amid the group workout one evening last fall, 39-year-old Hernandez, wearing pads on his hands, steps toward Hector Chirinos, 23, who ducks under his outstretched arm.

“Ah good job,” Hernandez nodded, then lifted the pads for Chirinos to hit.

Hernandez is 5'9” with the muscular frame of a welterweight who takes his fitness seriously. He keeps his hair shaved on the sides, usually with braids running from the top down the back of his head.

He wears layers to work out. They conceal large tattoos on his chest and arms. One of the larger tattoos on his chest is a collection of barber tools including a barber pole, clippers, scissors and a razor – a nod to the profession he entered as a young man.

Hernandez has racked up a professional boxing record of 27-6-3. But more importantly to a group of about 12 men ranging from their teens to mid-20s, he runs a boxing gym that helps “his kids.”

Like them, he grew up on the streets falling into a life around gangs.

“I passed through, so it’s like, I’m going to be with them because I know what they need,” Hernandez said.

Hernandez has been working with young people in Lebanon for about nine years and is known in the community for his work. Most come to him through word of mouth.

“He’s like a gift for the city,” James Alan Young, a local boxing coach, said. “He’s a great role model to these kids.”

A life that parallels

Hernandez moved to Lebanon from Puerto Rico at 13 with his mother. His father, originally from the Dominican Republic, died from gun violence when Hernandez was a baby.

“I was lost looking for my father in my mind,” Hernandez said. “I got an anger problem from wanting to talk to my father and wanting my father to be with me.”

Hernandez fell into a life on the streets while he was searching for a father figure.

“I always thought that my fight was going to be for my life,” he said.

When he was about 14, Hernandez moved to Boston, where he saw a friend get murdered by a rival. Fearful, he moved back to Puerto Rico where he continued his life on the streets – not seeing any way out.

In Puerto Rico, he was depressed. He was struggling to find a new path. His paternal grandmother stepped in.

When Hernandez was 17, his grandmother helped him move to the Dominican Republic to live with her. She made sure he finished high school and sent him to barber school.

She refused to have her grandson end up like her son, dead at a young age.

When Hernandez was younger, his mother did not discuss his father. His grandmother only said he was a good man but did not expand beyond that. So to fill the void, Hernandez created a mental image of the man he never knew – what he believed a father should be.

And living in the Dominican Republic gave Hernandez the chance to chase his father through the memories of people who knew him.

"I started meeting my father's friends and learned about my real father, who he was, what he was doing," Hernandez said.

Hernandez looked for the person who killed his father and learned he had gone to jail and died himself.

He had his father's remains moved from Puerto Rico to the Dominican Republic, where he was cremated and laid to rest in a cemetery plot that Hernandez paid for.

"That's when I kind of knew I was healed from wanting to know him," Hernandez said.

Hernandez moved back to Lebanon when he was 19 and worked as a barber.

He started boxing at 28 because he was looking to lose weight. He was 250 pounds when he began. He now fights at 154.

Initially he trained at any gym in the area he could, traveling as far as Allentown, around working as a barber.

At 30, Hernandez had his first professional fight and lost.

"Nobody came to my house after that and nobody called me," Hernandez said.

Isolated and depressed, Hernandez set out to train more intensely himself without coaches.

"I think there was a fire in me because I wanted to prove to people that I could be better than what they saw," Hernandez said.

At 31, he won his second professional fight.

When a friend asked for help with his son who was starting to get into trouble, Hernandez opened his first gym. That gym closed and he started his current gym in Ferrer Motorsports.

That was about five years ago.

The gym, the ‘kids’ and the work

Hernandez still fights professionally. He fought six times in 2022, and in 2023 he fought three times so far with a 2-1 record. But he spends the majority of his time helping his kids.

“I am who I am because of what happened to me, but I don't want the same things to happen to them,” Hernandez said.

He buys equipment for the gym when he can with gym fees, his winnings from boxing, and his barber work.

His gym has its own entrance at the back of the garage, opening out to a patch of grass outside and dismembered cars left to the elements.

The garage sits by row homes and a train track. Unless you knew of the gym, you would pass it without knowing.

Inside, the bags show a mixture of wear on them. Some new, some with tape on them, all hanging by heavy chains from the ceiling.

The odor of cleaning solutions barely mask the smell of sweat from the young boxers.

The number of kids at any given session varies depending on what is happening in the kids' lives. Sometimes, school obligations take priority, or family obligations. Sometimes they drift away or start hanging out again on the streets. Hernandez always welcomes them back to the gym when they are looking to turn around their lives again.

Since many kids have had lives similar to his, he said he understands the emotions that they need to work through.

"Sometimes you can tell in the motioning that they are very angry or sometimes it comes to hitting a bag so much they start crying and I need to take them to the side," Hernandez said.

Working with his kids requires lots of patience, he said.

"These kids are just waiting for somebody to talk to them," Hernandez said. "But instead people just close doors on them."

Hernandez lets anyone work out with him no matter what happened in their past. The first question he asks newcomers is always "why?" – why train as a boxer?

How the young person answers tells him a lot – that a kid is looking for discipline and structure. He said he is wary of those who just want to use their boxing skills on the streets.

"Most of these kids you look at them, and don't look like they need nothing," Hernandez said. "They look like they are happy going but inside they're destroyed."

Hernandez asks his kids to be honest with him if they don't have the money for the gym fee. He's always willing to come up with a creative solution, like asking a student to do chores around the gym as payment.

"I just need one that I changed his life and I feel awesome," Hernandez said.

Ramon Urina, 17, started boxing with Hernandez about two years ago.

Urina moved to Lebanon from the Dominican Republic at 15. He did not speak English and was bullied in school and getting into fights.

"Gangs were trying to pull me, but I never liked that because I want to make my family proud of me," Urina said. "If I don't know my coach, I don't know where my life is going to be right now. Probably dead or in the streets doing bad things."

Hernandez convinced Urina to start running at Lebanon High School.

"I said to him, 'you are fast. You get running and nobody can catch you,'" Hernandez said.

Urina completed his first cross country season in fall 2022 and was on the school's track and field team for spring 2023.

Carlos Alberto Marques Sanchez, 19, started with Hernandez in April 2022. He said he was praying for someone to come into his life to guide him.

“Since starting I am more focused, more motivated, more positive,” Sanchez said. “Coach always says to me to be a good person first.”

Hernandez is a father to three biological children, one son who lives in Puerto Rico and two daughters who live in Lebanon. He also has a boxing gym in the Dominican Republic that he visits when he is there. He plans to retire from professional boxing in about a year, but as for his gyms, those will continue.

“Most of these kids that come to boxing don't have a father figure or somebody to look out for them,” Hernandez said. “I'm taking advantage of that opportunity and I am teaching them through the coaching and teaching of boxing... I'm teaching discipline.”

‘Keep moving’

Jan Luis Suarez Torres, 24, graduated from Lebanon High School and moved to Minnesota and then to Florida where he became involved in the streets and around drugs. This led to a 30-day stay in jail before he moved back to Pennsylvania.

“I'm just like, this feels cool because you get all the girls and you get all the nice things like the cars and chains and the nice clothes,” Torres said. “But at the end of the day you just feel empty. You feel like you have nobody and when you either have nothing left or you get arrested, or you die, or you go to jail.... you just feel that emptiness.”

He began boxing with Hernandez last August.

On that fall night in the gym, Torres gets his turn in the ring with Hernandez.

“Movement,” Hernandez calmly tells Torres.

Hernandez steps towards him.

“Get them confused. Keep moving.”

The sounds of the gloves hitting the pads creates a ‘pop’ that mixes with the rhythmic sounds of the other kids' gloves hitting bags and jump ropes.

It all blends with a chorus of “pfft” created by all the boxers as they push air out of their lungs in fast bursts.

Without boxing or Hernandez, Torres said he would likely be back in the streets, in prison or dead.

“I never really, you know, grew up with a father-type figure,” Torres said. “I saw him (Hernandez) as a father figure for me since I started and I've just seen a lot of change.”