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Boxing comes to Northern Manhattan

by Francis Rodriguez

When the Inwood Boxing Academy opened its doors in July, it gave local youngsters a new place to work out and relieve stress.

Joel Brender, the owner of the academy, says he had the idea for the boxing center more than a year ago. Raised in Washington Heights, Brender has always had strong ties to the community and so it wasn't difficult to find an area where he could open a gym to teach the "sweet science."

"This is my community and I saw the need for a place where kids could have some fun and work out. I chose boxing because I like the sport and because I used to box and managed to lose some weight doing it," Brender says.

With its ample space and new equipment, a sense of organization and cleanliness are the two things that first jump out at you when you enter the academy, which happens to be on Academy Street. The gym isn't just for men. Indeed, a number of women have joined IBA.

"There is a lot of interest from women and, of course, they have their tastes. Some of them want pink gloves and I go out and get them," Brender says with a smile.

Brender says the gym is a safe place for kids. Parents have come to inspect the facility and have left satisfied with the program it offers. "A lot of the kids come by with their parents. In a

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lot of gyms there isn't a good feel. I can guarantee that everyone who works here is honest and decent and we won't allow anyone to upset the harmony we have created," he said.

Despite the fact that the IBA just opened, Brender has big plans. One challenge is finding financial support for some fighters. Many local youngsters who are eager to join the gym can't afford monthly membership dues. To help these kids and to expand his program, Brender plans on soliciting support from a number of local institutions.

Luckily, Brender isn't alone at the IBA. A group of trainers — including José Velez, Angelo Serrano y Kimani Cunningham — are helping guide the gym and its boxers. In addition, IBA has Scoop Gallelo, president of the International Veteran's Boxing Association, as an advisor and has registered with Amateur Boxing Association USA.

Marino Ramírez, a Dominican boxer known as "El Gato" (The Cat), is in charge of training at IBA and the opening of the gym is a great opportunity to show his skills and reconnect with the community. He says that he lives in New Jersey,

where he worked closely with troubled kids, showing them another way of life through boxing. "It was something I did as a volunteer. Finding this place in an area where there are so many Dominicans

is the best thing that could happen to me," he says.

With a mix of nostalgia and pride, Ramírez goes through news clips of his old fights. As he reviews them, two young men approach. George Maimo and Hansel Ureña have become regulars at IBA. Sixteen-year-old Maimo says that the gym hasn't just helped him drop some pounds but is also a good way to pass the time. "I like this place a lot. I was in a barbershop when someone came by with a flyer and it caught my eye. I came by with my mom and I decided to join." For his part, 15-year-old Ureña, who lives a block away from IBA, says boxing is a great way to stay in shape. "I come to the gym often and my sister just said that she was going to join. We really like the program."

IBA offers programs for adults and children over the age of 12.

For more information stop by the Inwood Boxing Academy at 651 Academy St, call 212-304-1043, or visit www.inwoodboxing.com.

**INWOOD BOXING ACADEMY**