



KIDS KICKING CANCER

FIGHTING THE DISEASE ONE KICK AT A TIME!

Detroit-based Rabbi Elimelech Goldberg, who likes to be called “Rabbi G,” is a black belt on a mission. His unique martial arts program, aided by his background as a Clinical Assistant Professor in pediatrics and martial arts master Richard Plowden, is helping 3,000 children around the world fight cancer, one kick at a time.

By Terry L. Wilson
Images by Josh Schwartz and Eric McNatt

HONORING SARA

The death of a child is a parent's worst nightmare. Dealing with such a tragedy encompasses myriad emotions. Rabbi Elimelech Goldberg (a.k.a., Rabbi G), founder of Kids Kicking Cancer, was faced with such inconsolable grief when he lost his young daughter to leukemia. He resolved to honor her memory by helping other children suffering from life-threatening diseases.

"My daughter, Sara, was diagnosed with leukemia a week before her first birthday,"



explains Rabbi G. "She had such a positive spirit. Even after very painful treatments, she would give the doctors a kiss and thank them. Sara would see children five years old who were crying uncontrollably. She would comfort

them and tell them not to cry.

"This goes back 35 years ago, to a time when children were not healing from leukemia. Of course, today it's a very treatable pediatric disease.

Sara put up a very brave fight, but lost her battle in 1981 at the age of two. She's the inspiration for everything that we do."

THE POWER OF THE MIND

For years, Rabbi G trained in choi kwang do under Grandmaster Choi. During his 13-year journey in the martial arts, he also studied



penchak silat.

"Martial arts gives an individual the opportunity to reach one's inner sense of purpose," he says. "It became apparent to me that the martial arts can become a spiritual and pow-

erful life source."

Using those lessons, the black belt rabbi created an unorthodox form of mental medicine to help ease the pain of suffering children. He blended tai-chi breathing techniques with yoga meditation and incorporated them into an innovative karate program.

This unique formula unleashed an inner strength known as chi in Chinese or ki in Japanese, an invisible energy that draws its power from the mind.

In karate, the hand or foot is merely an

instrument that delivers a message from the mind. Learning how to use the mind to deliver that message is the ultimate power. In most cases, the body will do whatever the mind wills it to do.

"Using [his martial arts] lessons, the black belt rabbi created an unorthodox form of mental medicine to help ease the pain of suffering children. He blended tai-chi breathing techniques with yoga meditation and incorporated them into an innovative karate program. Through these techniques, he gives hope to children who had lost all hope."

Rabbi G uses that force to empower sick children. Through these techniques, he gives hope to children who had lost all hope. The effectiveness of this power was never more evident than when Rabbi G came across a child suffering with uncontrollable pain.

"A few years after my daughter lost her fight with leukemia, I found myself directing a camp for kids with cancer in Port Jervis, New York," he recalls. "I came upon a five-year-old child that was screaming uncontrollably.

"In the old days in medical school, we were taught that there is a pain center in the brain. Today, we know it's an entire neuro-matrix. That means, if a person is angry and afraid, the actual expression of pain in the brain goes up significantly. And that pain was what the five-year-old was experiencing.

"The nurses tried to distract him, but nothing was working," Rabbi G recalls. "Two nurses pinned him down. A third nurse had a large syringe and was about to plunge it into his chest. Of course, the youngster was terrified and screaming uncontrollably. I yelled, 'Wait!' The nurses froze in place and the kid stopped screaming.

"I asked the nurses to give me five minutes with the child and they left. The boy looked at me as if I was the governor and I had just given him a stay of execution. I told him that I



was a black belt. That may not mean anything to an adult, but to a kid, it's a 'wow factor.' I asked him if he would like for me to teach him some martial arts and he nearly jumped off the table!"

Speaking sincerely, Rabbi G convinced the boy that he could control his pain with a tai-chi technique.

A LIFE-CHANGING EXPERIENCE FOR A TOUGH WORLD CHAMPION



"Once we get the students to buy into their own healing and their own ability to fight whatever they're going through, it's magical," says Five-Time World Semi-Contact Champion Richard Plowden. "Working with these kids has literally changed my life.

"I've won a couple of WAKO World Championships, I've won the Diamond Nationals, the AKA Grand Nationals, too. But all of that doesn't compare to how inspired I am by these kids."

Working every day with children who are facing life-and death outcomes can and does take a toll on a person. Even a champion in the ring can feel his knees buckle at the sight of a critically ill child.

Plowden admits that when he took the job as head instructor, he didn't foresee how it would affect him.

"When I joined the organization, I had no idea what I was getting into," says Plowden. "But at some point in time, all of us are going

to leave this world. And for me, being able to help and assist individuals through their life's journey, regardless of their age, is inspiring."

He gives the following example.

"During my first few years here, I had a young man who relapsed. I remember walking up to him at the hospital during his last days of life. He wasn't doing well at all. He looked up at me, smiled and said, 'I knew you would come.' I asked him, 'How did you know I'd be here?' He said, 'Because you *always* come.'

"I feel humbled to be able to bring some light into their lives. And to make a positive difference for them, regardless of where they are in life's journey. It truly does something for me. Thank goodness that the majority of the kids we work with survive.

"With that said, we do have a number that have passed on," he adds. "But my memory of them brings a smile to me. They helped change my life."

“The therapeutic curriculum for teaching martial arts to children started off focusing on cancer, then morphed to sickle cell. Now, we have what we call the Heroes Circle, which is kids being referred to us from hospitals with a variety of different diagnoses.”

“Five minutes later, we were doing a tai-chi breathing exercise. And 20 minutes later, they took the needle out. He looked up at the nurse and calmly asked, ‘Did you do it yet?’ And that’s when Kids Kicking Cancer was born.”

Kids Kicking Cancer began in 1999 with 10 children at the Children’s Hospital in Michigan. In fact, one of the children in that very first class is now one of their black belt instructors. The program quickly spread and is now in 45 hospitals, reaching more than 3,000 children in four countries.

A FIVE-TIME WORLD CHAMPION JOINS THE TEAM

As Rabbi G’s plan began to take shape, he recognized the need for a figurehead to teach the martial art classes. He didn’t have to look very far. The perfect candidate was living in Detroit and had the ideal credentials for the job.

Martial arts master Richard Plowden has stood for decades in the winner’s circle with his hand held high in victory.

“I’ve been an ardent tournament competitor since 1973 and I’m also heavily involved in community-oriented events here in Detroit,” says five-time World Semi-Contact Champion Plowden. “About 12 years ago, I got a phone call that would forever change my life.

“The call was from the president of New Detroit Incorporated. She told me about a Jewish rabbi who wanted to start an anger-man-



agement program in the Detroit Public Schools using the martial arts. They thought I would be the right person to give them some feedback based on my previous work with the community.

“At the meeting I meet Rabbi G, the founder of Kids Kicking Cancer, and we just happen to hit it off from there,” Plowden says. “He asked me if I would like to come to work for him as a consultant. I agreed. Then, a few months later, he asked me to come work for

the organization full-time.”

Working with a team of specialists, Plowden and Rabbi G created a therapeutic curriculum for teaching martial arts to children who have a variety of different diseases.

“It started off focusing on cancer, then morphed to sickle cell,” says Plowden. “Now, we have what we call the Heroes Circle, which is kids being referred to us from hospitals with a variety of different diagnoses. We use meditation and breathing techniques to

assist the kids with fighting their disease. It's an empowerment program. The kicking and punching is the carrot."

Plowden says they also do a "Body Scan." This is a relaxation technique that uses word association with deep breathing.

"We ask them to visualize how cool the air is when you breathe in, how warm it is when you breathe out. We keep repeating that mantra. Then, we get them to visualize the top of their head, let all your muscles relax and so on. It's a very deep form of meditation. By the end of the scan, a lot of them have fallen into a relaxed sleep.

"Regarding the karate training, of course we don't have them do any breaking or sparring," Plowden adds. "Their bones are too brittle for that. So, we don't have any physical contact between them. But for a kid that's confined to a wheelchair, just to be able to throw a punch or learn a block is very empowering."

POWER, PEACE AND PURPOSE

"Power, peace and purpose" is the mantra for a very special group of karate students. All of them are in the fight of their lives. Those three words have been a verbal lifeline connecting the students to a sense of hope that their disease had taken from them.



"It's so challenging for a child to be different from everybody else," points out Rabbi G. "On top of that, they are victimized by the disease and the very treatment that's supposed to help them."

He goes on to explain how everything in their daily environment takes a toll on them. From the medicine the children take, which makes them sick, to how they react to their

THE POWER OF A BLACK BELT



The power of a black belt has a special meaning to Rabbi G's students. The enemy these kids face is more fearsome and deadly than any schoolyard bully.

Rabbi G and retired world champ Richard Plowden have instilled in them a belief that a black belt holds a special power. And that power can protect and defeat any adversary, even cancer.

"So much of our program is to instill a belief in these children. The belief in a black belt is powerful because, in the movies, it's the black belts that beat up the bad guys. So, when we meet the kids in the hospital or in our classroom, they look at us in our uniforms and say, "Wow, this is a big deal!"

Recently, Rabbi G conducted a Breath Brake seminar for 1,200 people in South Africa, on how to use the breath to stop pain, fear and stress in their lives.

"I just returned from Johannesburg General Hospital in South Africa," he explains. "I brought the roof down. I mean literally, the roof collapsed the next day!"

"At the hospital, there were eight kids in a room. You know, they have this 'Make A Wish' program in the states? Well, one of the most profound wishes these children have in Johannesburg is *to have a bed*. They go into the hospital where they have a comfortable bed, then they go home and sleep on the floor.

"So, they wish for a bed, not a trip to Disneyland or a video game. Just a simple bed! This should put a sense of perspective into any of the magazine's readers about what blessings really are."

Even in the most deplorable of conditions, the Rabbi was able to work his magic with a roomful of sick children in record time.

"It took me a mere 90 seconds to teach these children how to breathe in the light and blow out the darkness," he says. "Our goal is to now spread this through Africa and to children in pain across the planet.

"Politics, religion or ethnicity matters nothing when you have the opportunity to spread light to a child in pain," he concludes.

THE MEASUREMENT OF SUCCESS

Kids Kicking Cancer
Power Peace Purpose

Pain is a message you do not have to listen to

PROGRAM NOW OPEN TO ALL CHILDREN WITH ANY PEDIATRIC ILLNESS

Kids Kicking Cancer's Heroes' Circle program provides classes and clinical interventions for children, both inpatient and outpatient, in the mind-body techniques found in the martial arts.

www.kidskickingcancer.org

Kids Kicking Cancer's success can be measured in many ways. The countless smiles the program brings to the faces of the children are one way. Another may be the hope the program gives to parents and patients alike.

Martin Bluth, MD, PHD, is the National Medical Director for Kids Kicking Cancer. He measures the program's success this way.

"If you have a drug that works on 30

percent of the population, you have a hit. If you have a drug that works on 40 percent of the population, you are a superstar.

"In our program, 85 percent of the kids being treated had a reduction in pain," Bluth says, proudly. "The general, across-the-board average of pain reduction is 40 percent. And that is the remarkable success of Kids Kicking Cancer."

mom and dad.

"Parents are supposed to protect their children," Rabbi G says. "But what the kids see is their mom and dad taking them to places where they get painful and frightening treatments. So, their whole world changes. They see mom and dad crying and upset, and they feel guilty for that. And even very young children often wonder, 'Am I going to die from this?'"

To combat this horrific emotion of pain and despair, the teaching staff employs the power of the mind to redirect the child's attention.

"Power means we can bring in this amazing healing energy," says Rabbi G. "Peace means we can push out pain, fear and anger. Those simple words have produced amazing results for thousands of suffering children."

"I say power, peace and purpose every time before they stick me with a needle," says eight-year-old Lexi Hugel. "When I say the words, it makes it so when they poke me, it doesn't hurt."

After more than three years, Lexi is now cancer-free. Her new goal is to continue training and someday be a black belt, so she can help other kids kick cancer.

"We can turn victims into victors by using the martial arts as a metaphor to battle their disease," Rabbi G explains. "By allowing the children to begin taking control with their breathing and movement, it gives them a sense of empowerment and control.

"I once explained to a little boy suffering from cancer that, in martial arts, pain is a message that you don't have to listen to. We teach our students that even if your body is weak, your mind is strong."

One example of pushing out the pain





is Luca Aversa, a five-year-old who was diagnosed with cancer at the tender age of four months. Now seven, he's one of Rabbi G's warriors that has gone from having to be held down for treatments to managing them on his own.

"When I say, peace, power, purpose, it makes the pain go away," Luca says with a smile.

HERE, THE STUDENTS BECOME THE TEACHERS

It may take an average student of any martial art years of serious training before he/she can bow in a class as an instructor. However, that isn't the case with Rabbi G and Plowden's students. In addition to helping their peers, these students have also shown



parents how to deal with their stress and pain as well.

"If you ask the thousands of kids we work with, 'What's your purpose?' they will yell out, 'To teach the world!' And that is because every one of our kids, from their very first class, becomes a teacher.

"When mom and dad get uptight, we tell the kids, 'You can teach them how to deal with their pain and stress just like you do.'"

Rabbi G and Plowden took a group of their

students around Detroit to visit other youngsters dealing with cancer. Rabbi G says the results were remarkable: Sick kids teaching other sick kids how to overcome whatever obstacles they're facing.

"The impact of watching our kids help other kids was amazing," says Rabbi G. So, we thought, if we can teach children, we can also teach adults. We just have to talk slower."

With that mindset, Rabbi G took a group of his students from Sloan Kettering

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Memorial Hospital to teach Pfizer executives how to breathe in the light and blow out the darkness.

"Three days later, I got a call requesting me to come to Rome to teach Pfizer Italy how to do our trademark Breath Brake," he says. "They wanted to learn how to use the Breath Brake to shut off the stress chemicals. It's like putting on the brakes in your car.

"The class in Rome was so successful that Pfizer sponsored our first event at the Vatican hospital, which I thought was really cool. An orthodox rabbi had to get permission from the Pope's office to teach an Eastern meditative technique to Vatican children."

Rabbi G is also actively looking for the right partners to bring Kids Kicking Cancer to children worldwide.

"Kids Kicking Cancer gives our children the tools to find the light that is already there," he explains. "And once they find that light, it changes everything."

Read more about Rabbi G in his book, *A Perfect God Created An Imperfect World Perfectly*, which chronicles 30 life lessons from Kids Kicking Cancer. It's available on Amazon.com.

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Through the newly-enhanced MAIA website, you can access nearly any piece of information, from A to Z, about what you want to help grow your school. You can search by month or by keyword to find exactly what you need. Visit www.maiahub.com to find other great features available only online. 🏆



"We can turn victims into victors by using the martial arts as a metaphor to battle their disease. By allowing the children to begin taking control with their breathing and movement, it gives them a sense of empowerment and control. We teach our students that even if your body is weak, your mind is strong."