

• By ARIEL ZILBER

Lora Valensi experienced what could hardly be described as a normal childhood. While constant and relentless teasing and harassment seem to be a rite of passage for many young boys and girls, Valensi's ordeals were compounded by the fact that she was born with Asperger's syndrome, a condition that the medical field considers a variant of autism.

"When you start talking to her, you begin to understand that she is not a regular girl," says her tae kwon do instructor, Omid Vahdaty. "But on the outside you don't see anything unusual. She's a girl with a brain that has a very special and unique pattern of thinking. Every sentence I've said to her in the 10 years that she has been here is etched into her brain. She could begin a conversation with me by bringing up something I said to her randomly a few years ago. Over the years, I've caught onto this and added context to our conversations, and this is by no means a trivial matter."

Having transferred in and out of numerous schools after bearing the brunt of her peers' merciless treatment, Valensi needed a forum that would nurture her and allow her to develop a sense of self while gaining confidence. This setting was provided by Vahdaty, a 32-year-old third-degree black belt in the Korean martial art, whose tae kwon do club at Tel Aviv University's Elite Sports Center offers Valensi and other people with various impairments an opportunity to practice a discipline known for instilling a sense of self-worth in its practitioners.

"We are in the business of training martial artists," says Vahdaty, a Ramat Gan native who took up tae kwon do 15 years ago. "It's difficult for someone from the outside to understand a statement like that. By training martial artists, I mean pouring efforts into building their self-confidence, improving their ability to appear in public, helping them develop their vision for the future, pushing them toward their goals. We teach them to recognize their weaknesses and not to run away from them."

Vahdaty's guidance has helped Valensi, 24, inch closer to her goal of one day becoming a tae kwon do instructor herself. After 10 years in Vahdaty's club, Valensi is on the verge of being awarded a black belt, an important milestone for instructors in training.

"Being here really strengthens me," she says. "It strengthens me both from a physical standpoint and from a psychological one. I decided to make a change in my life and pursue a career as an instructor. Before I came to tae kwon do training, I would be very sensitive whenever people would tease me, hit me, curse me. I would just cry."

Valensi says there were moments in her youth when the name-calling was so relentless that she would refuse to go to school the next day. Under Vahdaty's tutelage, she appears to have put her traumatic past behind her.

When she joined the club, her condition presented a challenge for Vahdaty. As an instructor of tae kwon do, he needs to impart to his pupils the principle of *pumsae*, a set of martial arts techniques that involves planned, choreographed maneuvers. While most students are able to absorb the basics within a month, it took two years to teach the steps to Valensi.

"In the first two years, she would do all the movements in one direction [instead of changing direction when required]," he said. "She would even do the motions continuously until she left the gym, and I had to run after her and bring her back. This presented a challenge to me. I thought to myself, 'There's no way that I can't find some way to teach this to her. She wants to learn. There's something that I need to try differently.'"

To help her, he devised a special set of instructions so



Omid Vahdaty. 'As an instructor, it's frustrating to work with children who have disabilities because you don't always know how to help them and you don't always have the tools to help them.' (Courtesy of Omid Vahdaty)

A fighting chance

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she could easily get down the motions and routines until it entered her muscle memory.

"I used all sorts of tricks. I said to her, 'Lora, when you start the movement, in which direction do you need to go?' and she would reply, 'Toward you.' Then I would ask, 'What direction do you need to go when you finish?' and she would answer, 'With my back toward you.' Right there, I gave her two clear directions to go in. I would say to her, 'Which side do you need to make the first movement?' And she would reply, 'Left.' And I would ask, 'Where is that?' and she would say, 'Over there.' All of a sudden, it became clear to her. Once I was able to get the message across, I was able to teach her 70 to 80 percent of the whole technique in less than three minutes. All the rest was just tiny nuances."

He adds that "the individual attention I gave her in trying to understand and to get to the root of the problem, not the symptom, trying to ascertain where exactly she is struggling... that is what I went after and attacked. This is something that is difficult to see because it requires a great deal of patience, many hours of observing and getting frustrated. As an instructor, it's frustrating to work with children who have disabilities because you don't always know how to help them and you don't always have the tools to help them. I'm just

a tae kwon do instructor, I'm not God."

His club is different from others in a number of ways, he explains, particularly when it comes to staff incentives.

"The club is not for profit," he says. "Nobody comes here for the pay. People on the staff here receive salaries, but they have other full-time jobs. They come here out of a sense of purpose, as if they were on a mission. It is a mission in which the goal is to train martial artists, to change people and to have an impact on their lives."

Rather than having a club geared exclusively toward people with disabilities, Vahdaty sought to integrate those students in the general tae kwon do group, with the aim of fostering a sense of inclusiveness that had previously been absent in their lives. When he is not teaching his pupils to master the ins and outs of martial arts, he works as a software configuration manager for a hi-tech firm in Ra'anana. The time he spends in the third-floor gym of the Elite Sports Center is what gives him drive and motivation.

"We train people who need a boost, a little push in the right direction, that's all," he says. "We work with people like you and me, people who have worries, concerns and weaknesses."