

Jiu jitsu as a Transformative Tool for Conflict Prevention
El Progreso, Honduras
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Goal:

My goal for this project was to work together with World Compass Foundation's (WCF) Chief Executive Officer, Raul Carrasco, to deepen the sustainability of and expand the organization's Souldiers Program—a values-based program in Honduras that uses Brazilian jiu jitsu as a transformative tool for youth development and empowerment.

The project addresses the need to strengthen leadership amongst youth currently in the program and will:

1. establish a sustainable base of student leaders who can serve as positive examples for other youth in the community,
2. serve as an outreach and recruiting base for expanding the program to more young adults and
3. create the opportunity for students who demonstrate consistency to become assistant coaches and professors of jiu jitsu in the future and lead the next generation(s) of the program.

Contributions:

CrossGym, a gym in El Progreso, Honduras, provides the training space and Raul Carrasco donates his time as the professor of the jiu jitsu program. World Compass Foundation contributed funds outside the DPP budget to cover additional expenses related to the project.

Significance and Inspiration:

Honduras faces a number of challenges, including extreme poverty, gang violence and inequitable access to economic and social opportunities. Because of this, many young people in Honduras feel the pressure to join gangs and/or drop out of school at a young age to work or help support their family. Many youth also feel that they have little to no opportunities to improve the economic and/or social conditions into which they were born or live under.

After volunteering my time, energy and efforts with the Souldiers Program in Honduras for years, I have witnessed how jiu jitsu has the power to transform lives. Through jiu jitsu, students can improve anxiety management, learn consistency and how to remain calm under pressure, gain confidence, develop discipline, improve resilience, and increase both physical and mental strength. Youth who participate in the program are more focused in life and have the support of a positive community with personal and professional experience to guide them to make the best decisions.

I wanted to support the sustainability of a program that has the power to positively impact the lives of many young people today and also those of future generations.

Challenges/COVID-19 Implications:

Since jiu jitsu is a close-contact martial art, the most challenging aspect of the project was adapting it to keep students safe during the COVID-19 pandemic. We had to change the timeline of the project because of COVID-19 restrictions and first focused our efforts on strengthening leadership amongst youth who were training with the program prior to COVID-19. We also had to change the target beneficiary group because there was a high risk of COVID-19 spreading among the children from the children's homes. Therefore, we focused on expanding the program to young adults from El Progreso, ages 14-26 years old, with a specific focus on increasing female participation.

Peace:

Because of jiu jitsu, I believe peace is more than the absence of violence, war or chaos. At the end of the day it takes focus, respect, persistence, tolerance and hard work to prevent conflict from happening in the first place. Peace is an active effort to overcome the challenges and difficulties faced throughout life with respect towards others and oneself throughout the process.

This project contributes to peace by teaching students how to confront the difficulties they face in life in a respectful and healthy manner. These difficulties might relate to personal hardships, such as the death of a loved one, depression or anxiety, or challenges that involve other people such as disagreements or differences of opinion.

Reflection:

Coming from an athletic background has influenced me in finding a way to support others through sport. Davis Projects for Peace allowed me to support the Souldiers Program in a big way by providing the funding that was needed to help shape the base of a sustainable leadership program that we will be able to replicate and reciprocate for years to come.

Jiu jitsu is a journey. It's a journey that not many students make it to the end of—no, not because of getting injured, but because of quitting. Why? One, because the learning never really ends. In jiu jitsu, a student is constantly challenged to continue improving both mentally and physically. Second, jiu jitsu is a journey that takes on average 10 years to achieve the highest level (black belt)—where a student reaches not only an expert level of technical and practical skill, but also a master level of mental control and emotional maturity. During those years, students are on a path of continuous learning and are constantly challenging their ego. This is why you might hear a black belt humbly say something similar to, “I’m a white belt (beginner) that never quit.” Because of this, jiu jitsu has a lot to teach on a number of levels—primarily that transformative change doesn’t always come from grand actions. Oftentimes, the biggest improvements are made over time and in the details.

Milestones:

Some of the milestones we achieved during the project period include:

- Three students were promoted to a higher belt after demonstrating deep progress.
- Nearly 20 belt stripes (representative of improvement in technique and demonstration of values) were achieved by students in the program.
- We developed and began implementation of a 4-month marketing plan with a local production company to expand the program locally, with a focus on female participation.
- We are in the process of extending the reach of the Souldiers Program to two additional cities in Honduras after receiving jiu jitsu students from La Ceiba and San Pedro Sula who are interested in forming part of our association and continuing their training with Souldiers.

Quotes:

“Transformative change doesn’t always come from grand actions. Oftentimes, the biggest improvements are made over time and in the details.” —Shannon Casey

“Jiu jitsu is a journey that goes beyond learning and practicing technique—it’s a journey that involves living out the very same hard work, commitment and values both in life and on the mat. It’s a journey that involves becoming not only a better martial artist, but also a better person.” —Shannon Casey

