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HEALTH CARE **HEROES**

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Through karate, a rabbi teaches kids to manage pain

DUSTIN WALSH



REPRINTS



Winner: Advancements in Care

Rabbi Elimelech "Michael" Goldberg

Founder and Global Director, Kids Kicking Cancer

"Wait!" Michael Goldberg yelled to nurses in a New York hospital who were attempting to inject chemotherapy into a young child's chest port. They were pinning him down as he screamed in fear.

His own daughter died only months earlier from cancer and he couldn't bear to witness the agony.

"I had no clue what I was going to say next," said Goldberg, who now goes by Rabbi G and was a camp counselor at the time. "I asked them to give me a few minutes with this child, who looked at me like I was the governor who just stayed his execution. I told him I was a black belt and asked if he'd like to learn karate. He jumped off the table. I told him pain was a message but you didn't have to listen and showed him a tai chi technique of breathing."

Rabbi G said nurses returned and administered the needle in the child with not even a whimper. The power of meditative breath sparked the pain management and end of life care professor at Wayne State University to start the therapeutic martial arts nonprofit Kids Kicking Cancer.

The nonprofit began in Children's Hospital of Michigan but has since expanded to 126 facilities in nine countries to teach children to "Breathe in the light and blow out the darkness" in a curriculum for self-regulation and pain management. It employs around 50 with another 300 volunteers.

A study by WSU revealed the nonprofit's therapies have reduced pediatric cancer pain in 85 percent of the children surveyed with an average pain reduction of 40 percent.

"It's relatively inexpensive to integrate the therapies into the minds of children," Rabbi G said. "Teaching the children to have this control is really life changing. The ability to self regulate makes chemical changes in the body and brain. The martial arts is the hook, but there is no contact. This is the spiritual part of martial arts."

The group sends coloring books to pediatric cancer wards across the U.S. that asks children to draw their light and their darkness. The children then punch through their darkness, physically and metaphorically.

Rabbi G said the nonprofit's goal is to reach 1 million children worldwide and spread light in those moments of darkness.

"The greatest challenge to public health is ambivalence," he said. "Unless you're making systemic change in the individuals, you're not making change in the community, and that's what we really want to do here. Change the community for the better."