

## **Boxer punches prognosis**

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Michael Briggs has been fighting most of his life, first on the streets and later in the ring. As a scrawny white kid growing up on Wellington Street, he learned to use his fists. Then, when he was 12, he met boxing coach Carlos Garcia at the Ionic Avenue Boys Club.

"He saved my life," said Briggs, now 40. "He taught me how to be a man. He was always there for me."

A yellowed newspaper clipping from 1986 tells of how Briggs won the New England Junior Olympics boxing title. It talks of how the then-15-year-old champ was never a natural in the ring, but he kept at it.

"Even though I lost, every time I fought I saw myself getting a little better," the boy said. Today, after raising a family and devoting his life to troubled kids, the man is in the fight of his life. And still, his childhood coach is by his side.

A nagging cough last December sent the father of five to the doctor for a series of tests. The diagnosis was devastating. Briggs had lung cancer.

He underwent chemotherapy and radiation and was scheduled for surgery this month to remove part of his lung. But more tests revealed on Friday that the cancer had spread. Now, the surgery is off. Doctors have told Briggs he has 13 to 18 months to live.

Briggs isn't buying it. The spirit of the determined young boy has always lived in the man, and it's led him from hardship to tragedy and the blessings of love and family. And it will lead him, he says, to outlive his prognosis.

"My family needs me," he said yesterday. "I don't plan on losing."

He never did. Under Garcia's tutelage, Briggs thrived in the ring and as a sophomore at Doherty received the William S. Gilliam Award, presented by the Boys Club for outstanding leadership and community service.

He moved to Rhode Island as a teenager to live with an older sister. He would stay for 10 years and meet his future wife, Tina. He was about to turn pro when Tina got pregnant, and they began to build a family.

He held a series of jobs - carnival ride jock, pizza shop manager, maintenance man. In 2002, his father died of cancer. Four months later, he and his wife awoke on Easter Sunday to find their 3-month-old son, Dante, dead of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome.

Briggs returned to Worcester with his family in 1998 and soon found himself back at the Boys Club. It was Carlos Garcia who helped get him a job at the Department of Youth Services. He's worked there for 13 years, using the skills he learned from Garcia to reach out to troubled kids.

"So many of his lessons have stuck with me as an adult," said the soft-spoken Briggs. "Carlos always listened to you, and a lot of these kids have no one to do that. This is where I belong."

His two teenage sons have followed their dad into the ring. So when Briggs gets home from work he collects his boys and brings them to the club, where he volunteers beside his mentor. He told his old coach of his prognosis; Garcia told him to ignore it.

Now, led by Garcia, the local boxing community is rallying around the well-liked Briggs and planning a fundraiser May 23 at Viva Bene.

"He's been a good kid all his life," Garcia said. "He could have got into trouble, but he decided to live a good life."

Briggs says he never asks himself why he got cancer. He's just trying to figure out how to beat it.

"Carlos taught me you can do anything if you put your mind to it," he said. "I'm a poor kid from Wellington who did OK. God has blessed me with such beautiful things in my life. Now I have to roll with the punches, and fight back."

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