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Teacher Packs a Real Punch in El Cerrito By Kelly St. John

El Cerrito English teacher, Yvonne Caples says giving a student a punch in the nose can sometimes be a way of winning his respect –if the blow is given with boxing gloves.

For a teacher, gaining the respect of students can mean the difference between success and failure. That respect can be hard to earn. During Caples' first year of teaching, "my students tested me right away," she said. Cultivating respect took time and patience, she said, but Caples had another useful trick up her sleeves.

She is a Golden Gloves Champion boxer.

The 105-pound fighter, who is looking to line up her first professional bout, last year taught a class for students with severe discipline problems at El Cerrito's Portola Middle School. As a reward, Caples took students to the boxing gym to work out with her after school, and even sparred with them.

Fighting in the ring "made my students realize that despite their tough attitude, they weren't so tough," Caples said, "In the back of my mind, I was worried that one might beat me, but it never did happen."

"More than anything, they really developed respect for me, and appreciation that I took time out to take them," she said.

As in teaching, respect as a boxer must be earned, and it takes time. The first day Caples, 26, went to a boxing gym five years ago, she was hitting a bag when a man walked by and asked "How come girls always hit like that?" The attitude of other boxers changed, Caples said, "When they saw me as serious, and that I was developing some talent."

And Caples has talent, said her trainer, Paul Wright of the East Oakland Boxing Association, himself a former boxer. Caples' success, he said, comes from her speed and good technique.

"She just outsmarts somebody. She's not there to knock people out. She likes to box," he said. Wright met Caples last year when she brought her students into the modest gym on 98th Avenue. "Some of the kids outweighed her by 40 pounds. She bopped them all," Wright said. "That's when I just said, 'This girl is good.'"

Boxing's popularity is growing among professional women. Caples recently started teaching an evening course for women boxers at UC Berkeley. But while fighters are joining the women's amateur ranks, it is still difficult for experienced fighters such as Caples to find enough compatible opponents. That's one reason Caples is looking to turn professional after just nine amateur bouts.

Caples has always been athletic, and completed four triathlons before the age of 21. Still, at first glance, the Caples in her school clothes hardly looks the part of the serious fighter that she is.

"When I first heard about Caples' boxing career," said Portola principal, Marcia Hataye, "it kind of made me laugh. She's the last person I would have expected to do it."

And, Hataye said, that is not the only time she underestimated Caples.

When Hataye's vice principal first suggested that Caples, a young substitute in English as a Second Language, be tapped to fill the full-time job at the El Cerrito school teaching students with more than 20 days of suspension from school, Hataye said she was reluctant to approve the appointment.

It takes not only firmness and caring to reach these students, who are mostly boys, many from single parent homes, Hataye said, but also something of a hard edge.

"Ms. Caples has this quiet air about her," Hataye said. "She didn't strike me as a person who has that side to her."

But Caples was offered the position teaching the class, which the school calls "Opportunity." She thrived by working hard and projecting that she cared for her students, Hataye said.

The danger of misjudging someone is a lesson that boxing teaches, explained Caples. "You can never underestimate who you're in the ring with. It takes just one shot to get knocked out," she said.

Boxing is often perceived as violent, but Caples said it offers a positive outlet for some children, particularly those who come from neighborhoods where the ability to fight is valued.

"The kids who have troubles are the ones who lose their composure easily. Boxing is a way for them to channel their frustration and the quick temper they have," she said. Also, students who charged aggressively into the ring quickly learned that doing so made them open to getting hit, she added.

In boxing and teaching, "you really have to concentrate on so many things at once, and it's always a challenge to keep your cool in both," she said.

So which scared her more: her first day in the classroom or first fight in the ring? The veteran of bloody noses and black eyes paused before answering.

“Probably the classroom,” she said. “You feel like you’re responsible for all those kids, and not just yourself.”