

MMA training boosts teenager's confidence

By **NICK BOWLIN**
STAFF WRITER

Every Tuesday night, Chase Wallace learns to fight.

Amid the thump of boxing gloves and a steady stream of pop music, the 15-year-old Lower Makefield resident practices Muay Thai at a martial arts studio in Langhorne.

Chase seems comfortable in the gym, but the past few years have not been easy. His parents divorced and he was forced to change schools, leaving behind his friends. He developed a facial tic from the stress, he said, and became a target of bullying at his new school.

"I didn't have any friends," he said. "(His new classmates) would make jokes, call me names, just make fun of me."

His mother, Donna Cavallo, saw a change in her son.

"Chase went in on himself, didn't go out anymore," she said.

Then, in April 2015, Chase began training at MPR Endurance MMA, which he and his mother see as a turning point. He became more social, more confident and has made friends.

"It has helped me a lot," he said. "I love this place. It makes me feel good about myself."

Chase's training is sponsored by the local nonprofit Plant a Seed Foundation. Founded by Gene and Michele Rice, of Newtown, the foundation provides funds for children who, for whatever reason, cannot pursue their interests.

"It's our way of giving back," Gene Rice said.

Gene Rice, who helped start the executive search firm Rice-Cohen International, and Michele Rice established the foundation



KIM WEIMER / PHOTOJOURNALIST

Chase Wallace (right), 15, of Lower Makefield, spars with partner Joe Licolli, 14, of Bensalem, during an MMA training session at MPR Endurance in Langhorne.

in 2008 and continue to fund it with a family trust. Chase was their 600th scholarship recipient. They sponsor approximately 35 children and teenagers in Bucks County, Philadelphia and Trenton.

"When a kid has a passion, it becomes a key development in their personal development," Gene said. "They get role models, they make friends, it raises their self-esteem. It gives them a purpose and something to look forward to."

"It makes them less likely to drift," Michele added.

They often sponsor kids from low-income families.

"We don't want children not to be able to pursue what they're passionate about because of financial concerns," she said.

Once accepted into the foundation, each child receives a \$1,000 yearlong scholarship — they are renewable, according to the Rices. Sponsored activities include music, dance, art, horseback riding, dozens of different sports and even rock climbing. The foundation coordinates with instructors, coaches and teachers, and these partners

accommodate the foundation's financial limits, according to the Rices.

Erik Purcell, the owner of MPR and a former professional fighter, gave the foundation a discount for Chase's training.

"There's so much value in training kids," he said, adding that he wants to pass along his passion for mixed martial arts to kids like Chase.

"When (Chase) showed up, he didn't know how to throw a punch. He shied away from contact. And now he's a martial artist," Purcell said, who said the training is solely for self-defense, not aggressive action.

Chase was reserved when he began at MPR, but "he came out of his shell quickly," Purcell said. He thinks that the training has helped Chase adjust to social challenges in school.

Cavallo agrees — she credits Purcell with boosting her son's self-confidence and calls him a mentor.

"Erik shows him attention, cares about him, and makes sure he's doing his school work," she said.

Nick Bowlin: 215-949-4213;
email: nbowlin@calkins.com;
Twitter: @npbowlin