

Safe at home

A unique sports program allows girls with troubled pasts to build confidence through teamwork

By Don Aucoin
GLOBE STAFF

MARLBOROUGH — Delmy Ascencio is running as if her life depends on it. She's trying to turn a routine ground ball into a base hit, but the ball arrives at the bag before she does. She's out. No, wait: The first baseman dropped the throw. Second chance — and 14-year-old Ascencio knows what to do with those.

So when the shortstop bobbles a pop-up a minute later, Ascencio zips around second base and charges all the way to third. Then she races home on a grounder. Beaming, she jogs over to the bench, where her teammates are waiting with high-fives and jubilant cries of, "Good job, Del, good job!"

If they seem awfully animated about a simple softball game, there's a reason.

Ascencio and her teammates live at the Walden Street School, a residential program in Concord for girls and young women struggling with psychiatric problems stemming from biological causes, or, in some cases, from abuse or trauma. Some ran away from home or joined a street gang and committed crimes. Some were hospi-



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Delmy Ascencio (above left, with Holly Cloutman, and below) is a participant in the Doc Wayne Athletic League. The onetime C student says she's now making A's because, "I realized that I love to play sports, and in order to play sports, you have to behave and get good grades."



talized for repeatedly cutting themselves. Some developed eating disorders, or battled anxiety, anger, depression.

What got lost along the way was a piece of childhood, and that is what they seem intent on recovering — play by play, cheer by cheer — on this sunny weekday. "These kids got so stigmatized because they're in treatment," notes Rob Gervais, program director at the Metropolitan Treatment Center in Roslindale, who launched the sports league five years ago and on this day watches from the sideline. "They couldn't play sports in high school because of their behavior or other issues. This is what they missed out on."

To look at Ascencio's confident swing, expert fielding, and ebullient manner, you would never guess she did not play sports while growing up in Somerville, or that

when she first arrived at the Walden Street School she was sullen and withdrawn.

Today, Ascencio is seldom without a smile on her face (even after she accidentally bops herself on her batting helmet while taking practice swings in the on-deck circle). Her athletic prowess won her Most Valuable Player honors in basketball and several trophies in other sports. A C student in Somerville, she now gets straight A's. "She's not even the same person I remember," marvels Kari Beserra, the school's director. "She is one of the leaders of our community, and one of the role models that others aspire to be."

To Ascencio, the equation is simple. "I realized that I love to play sports, and in order to play sports, you have to behave and get good grades," she explains.



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Above: Delmy Ascencio makes the play at first base. Below: Holly Cloutman says her involvement in sports has helped her emerge as a peer leader at her school.

Beneath that formulation, of course, lie the complicated human particulars of each of the school's 28 girls. Not all of them can or want to play in the sports program, which (like the Walden Street School itself) is run by the Justice Resource Institute, a non-profit organization that provides treatment for clients of the Department of Social Services and the Department of Youth Services. The program, known as the Doc Wayne Athletic League, encompasses soccer, basketball, and flag football in addition to softball. The opportunity to play is open to all of the students, but participation is voluntary. For those girls who participate, the lessons learned — about how to work as one of a team, and about qualities they didn't know they had, like self-control and resiliency — can be potentially life-changing.

"At the beginning of our season you get a lot of 'I can't do this,'" says Craig Babineau, the staffer at the Walden Street School who coaches the softball team. "But once they realize they *can* do it, it's a complete 180."

That's how it played out for 15-year-old Vanessa Courtney of Taunton, a student at the Framingham-based Glenhaven Academy of Marlborough (also run by the Justice Resources Institute), who was playing a game on an adjoining field. "The first time I batted, I struck out," says Courtney. "And I thought: 'I'm no good at this.' But my second time up, I hit it in the woods."

In Taunton, Courtney says, her life was chaotic: "I was breaking the law, skipping school, running away." When she first arrived at Glenhaven, she had trouble getting along with the other girls and staying focused. But she learned how to transfer the lessons of the sports program to her everyday life and her academic pursuits (the C's and D's she used to get have been supplanted by A's and B's). "When you're on a team, you need structure," she explains. "You need to sit on the bench and support your teammates. And when you're on the field, you need to do your best. It disciplines you."



Drawing on that discipline, she says she never misses a day of school now, and she depends on the girls she once shunned. "You want to go to school and see the smiling faces of people who are going through what you're going through, because they can help me and I can help them," says Courtney.

The Doc Wayne League began with a grant from Susan Wayne, former president and CEO of the Justice Resource Institute, and was named after her late brother, a pediatric surgeon. According to Wayne, her brother believed that sports could help turn kids' lives around, and he would be pleased to see his philosophy in action, especially since many of the girls are being introduced to athletics for the first time. "These are the kids who just never got picked," she says. "Imagine being a high school kid and not having sports."

Of course, sports is not enough when it comes to the array of emotional and behavioral problems the Walden Street School students are dealing with. The school provides clinical treatment and therapeutic support to its girls, who range in age from 12 to 22, along with a full academic course load. But Beserra makes clear that the sports program feeds into the rest of what the school is trying to accomplish. "These girls really have not had a chance to develop an identity," she says. "We want to give them an opportunity to participate in sports and find out what they're good at."

And maybe pick up a snazzy nickname while they're at it. Among the players on the field as Walden Street takes on a team from the Framingham-based Wayside Youth and Family Support Network is 16-year-old Holly Cloutman of Danvers. At her old school, she says, "When I played track, everybody made fun of me. At first I was nervous, playing a sport here. I was like 'Are they going to make fun of me? Will I be any good?' It turns out I am good." So good, she confides, that "the kids here cheer me on by my nickname: Hollywood."

Within the school, she says, she has emerged as a leader who is unafraid to step in to mediate between two girls who are arguing. "I never thought I would be a referee," she says shyly. Now, she has decided she wants to eventually go to Salem State College and study early childhood education. Courtney, too, has discovered a mission and a vocation: She wants to work in a program like the one she's in. "It's good to have people who've been where you are," she says.

As for Ascencio, her goal is to be a professional basketball player. But that's down the road. At this moment, she is glowing in the aftermath of her team's 8-1 victory. Asked what made the difference in the game, Ascencio does not hesitate for an instant.

"We took it more seriously," she says.

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