Teaching Chess, and Life

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If you were to walk down West 160th Street in Washington Heights, you would see drug dealers whistling to people in cars and handing off small packages to passersby. As you walk further down the block, you would see residents who are too scared to sit and talk to their neighbors on the front steps. These families stay inside most of the time. You would see parents pick up their children from P.S. 4 and hurry off the block before trouble can start. This is my block and this is my neighborhood.

Many kids my age in Washington Heights wind up in gangs, as drug dealers, in jail, or dead. I decided long ago that I would not end up in one of those situations because of the consequences I saw others suffer. I have stuck by this decision with help from several important people. One of the most influential people in my life is my former chess coach and current boss, Jeremy Chiappetta, who has taught me a lot about chess and more about life.

As an eighth-grader at a gang-infested junior high school, I joined the chess team as a way to stay out of trouble. I already knew the coach, Mr. Chiappetta, because he was my social studies teacher.

As a ninth- and tenth-grader, I volunteered to help Chia with his chess team at Intermediate School 90 on West 168th Street. During these years, I matured. I learned how to present myself in a positive way: taking off my hat inside buildings, judging when it was appropriate to make jokes (I had to learn this lesson a few times), and knowing how to speak in certain situations.

At one tournament I learned an important lesson from Chia. It was the last round of the U.S. Amateur Team East. I was playing for a top prize and was nervous. In the middle of the game I found a winning combination and I began to slam the pieces out of happiness. Then a big hand stopped the game clock and pulled me away. It was Chia. I could tell that he was angry, but I did not realize what I had done wrong. We talked about the meaning of sportsmanship. I apologized for my rudeness to my opponent and forfeited the game. I didn’t win a prize

With Chia’s mentorship, I learned from my mistake. As a coach at I.S. 90, I’ve had to teach the same lesson to others. It makes me feel good about myself because I like helping the younger kids learn the game Chia taught me to love.

Chia left I.S. 90 the year I became an eleventh-grader. He recommended me as an assistant chess coach, for which I am paid. This is my second year at I.S. 90 as an assistant coach. My responsibilities include teaching chess strategies and tactics three days a week. I also chaperone the team at tournaments almost every weekend.

All of this would not have been possible if not for Mr. Chiappetta. He turned me to chess and kept me involved. He gave me the opportunity to earn money doing something I love. Chess has kept me off the streets. It has challenged me and taught me to think in new ways. Because of chess, I was recently honored by the *Daily News* as one of the “21 New Yorkers to Watch in the 21st Century.” Chess has made me a mentor to younger students, giving me the chance to become their Chia.