

# *United Voices*

## **BEST SHOT FOR A BETTER LIFE**

*Street gangs can knock troubled teens off the path to success.  
Paul Pleticha's Villa Park Boxing Club helps kids sidestep gang life and keep their eyes  
on the prize of a better future.*



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**O**n street corners and in schoolyards, teenagers try to dodge gain intimidation. Some throw in the towel, surrendering to a life of drugs and crime. Others, often with a little help overcome the dangers of gang influence. United Airlines vehicle driver and amateur boxing coach Paul Pleticha teaches Chicago-area boys and girls to duck negative forces. He's a credible role model since he was once close to being "down for the count" himself.

When Pleticha was 12, his father abandoned the family, leaving Pleticha's mother to raise five children on her own in a one-bedroom apartment. A young, secure Pleticha was ripe for gang recruitment. Luckily, he found a boxing ring at a local gymnasium. "The sport kept me from trouble and taught me discipline and focus that I've carried into adulthood," he says.

Behind the wheel for United, Pleticha's sound judgment and quick reflexes help him safely transport employees between the airline's World Headquarters and Chicago O'Hare Airport. After Pleticha climbs from the driver's seat at work, he heads to his nonprofit boxing club in Villa Park, Illinois. There, he coaches kids to spar in the ring instead of on the streets.

"Not everyone likes boxing, he concedes, "but it's better to face an opponent wearing boxing gloves than holding a gun or knife. Kids at the Villa Park Boxing Club practice self-control, not gang-control."

Pleticha doesn't pull punches with the rules. Before strapping on gloves, members sign Pleticha's contract to stay gang- and drug-free, maintain good grades, and obey their parents. To help, he counsels kids and provides a tutor. Pleticha admits juveniles in detention or on probation into the program, but members who get involved with gangs or drugs are out of the club with no second chances. "As licensed amateur boxers, they accept certain responsibilities," he says. "I teach boxing skills, but I focus on developing self-esteem and mutual respect."

Coworkers at United who also like boxing believe in Pleticha's coaching style, which draws upon his military boxing career and experience raising five teenagers of his own. At tournaments, Pleticha often sees his supervisor and fellow drivers in the stands.

Family support also is important to the club's success. Pleticha's wife and a son help him manage the group and shape talented trainees into champions.

"Villa Park boxers hold trophies from Silver Gloves, Golden Gloves, and state championships," says Pleticha. "Win or lose, I'm proud when they give it their best shot."

Pleticha coached to victory one young man with a history of trouble. At first, the teen was very aggressive and even quit the club. He humbly returned to become one of the state's best boxers and hopes one day to compete for Olympic gold – a remarkable triumph for a boxing club surviving on a few thousand dollars donated each year.

"Sometimes, we have to scrape together enough money to attend the next match," explains Pleticha. The group trains on hardwood floors in a church basement. Pleticha repairs the club's equipment himself so there's money for quality protective gear and tournament expenses. In a pinch, he dips into his own pocket.

Pleticha questions the ethics of professional boxing promoters who promise fame and fortune, so he banishes scouts from training sessions. His glory is in helping kids realize their potential and change their attitudes.

"My tough discipline provides the guidance many teens are looking for," he says. Whether these young adults follow amateur boxing dreams or pursue careers, they will always remember Pleticha as the hard-hitting coach who gave them a fighting chance.

Editor's note: For more information on the Villa Park Boxing Club, contact Paul Pleticha at Tel: 630-530-7617.