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OPINION

What an Azusa boxing gym can teach us



Bellator featherweight champion Cris Cyborg during an open workout at her Huntington Beach gym, Tuesday September 6, 2022. Cyborg will be making her professional boxing debut vs. Simone Silva on Sept. 25 in her hometown of Curitiba, Brazil. (Photo by Hans Gutknecht, Los Angeles Daily News/SCNG)

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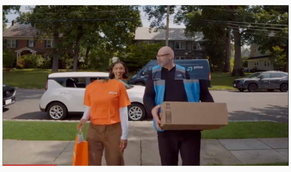
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There's a 900-square-foot boxing gym tucked into the furthermost corner of a well-worn strip mall on the northside of Arrow Highway where Azusa's city limits rub against Covina's. You have to want to find Valverde Boxing Gym to see it. I found it eight months ago as a 47-year-old dad looking to lose some pandemic weight. In the process, I've learned the sport of boxing, and the consecrated place and space where it happens, the gym, reflect the values that ground our pride during Hispanic Heritage Month — Sept. 15 to Oct. 15 — and beyond.

Take for example the ambition of gym owners Daniel and Yuridia Valverde. Daniel came to the United States in 2005 from Coahuilla, Mexico, landing first in Philadelphia, where he took odd jobs, squeezing in time to train at renowned Philly boxing gyms, and then onto New York City for a brief work stint and finally in Los Angeles, where he turned his boxing expertise into a business. His wife, Yuri, is foundational to the operation.

Together, at 6:30 a.m., they open the gym doors Monday through Friday and close them around 9 p.m., as the last student and her parents amble out. You'll find their 6-, 5-, 3- and 1-year-old children at the gym, the three oldest boys not only learning to bob and weave but also tossing baseballs and playing tag. The gym has almost 100 students and Daniel trains a handful of professional fighters. These fights take him across the country, away from the gym and his wife and kids. In boxing, you fight to eat.

Enter the gym and you'll note the diversity of people piling in. Even if most of the students are Hispanic, their stories and stations are varied. You'll find Mexicans, Mexican Americans, Central and South Americans. Some students are Black. Others are Korean, And still others, Polish and Chinese. Filipino, too. You'll find a lawyer, a bouncer, a former San Gabriel Valley mayor. Women and children. And even as all those distinctions serve to differentiate gym-goers, it's all but erased when they enter the ring. There isn't a degree or strand of DNA that can block an overhand right. The ring is the great equalizer.



As for me, I'm pulled toward environments where people volunteer to suffer together in pursuit of a higher goal ... or lighter weight. I make my way into the gym four mornings a week. I'm there for an hour or two, jumping rope, shadow boxing, hitting the pads and the bags and on Fridays, other students.

That's when we spar. There's often a palpable sense of adrenaline and dread on those days. I rely on the adrenaline to get me over the ropes and into the ring. The adrenaline keeps my hands up and my head moving. And if things go according to plan, I'll be punched several times by a grown man trained to throw punches.

You can understand the dread.

But while there is ferocity in the ring, there is also charity. I often face off against students with more experience and skills. They punch faster and harder than me. But we share a coach. We share a gym. We share an objective. So there's an implicit agreement that teaching and learning is more important than hurling and hurting.

Nevertheless, I've been hit. I've been hurt. I've been back.

At Valverde Boxing Gym, I'm reminded there's much to celebrate. Our ambition, courage, and persistence are on display, not only in gyms across the U.S.A. and not only during Hispanic Heritage Month, but always, everywhere.

Carlos Aguilar lives in Covina and is editorial director at Quantasy and Associates, a full-service advertising agency in downtown Los Angeles. The social media for Valverde is https://www.instagram.com/valverdeboxingclub_/

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